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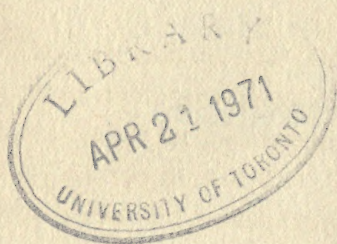
Serf Life in Russia

The Childhood of a Russian Grandmother

By
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and
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PREFACE

THE pictures of serf life in Russia (as it existed before 1861) collected together in this volume are not only interesting as being what the French would call "*sensations vécues*," but are also of psychological value as being the self-revelation of the outwardly wayward, but vibrantly sensitive child soul of a little girl, brought up under almost mediæval conditions in the middle of the nineteenth century. Old social and economic forms were crumbling away around the child, who played and dreamed, and often revolted, in the garden of the old Russian manor house. The first faint impulses of modern thought, science, and economic outlook were making themselves felt in town and university centres throughout the civilised world. Steam and electricity were already beginning to undermine stealthily the fortresses of the "old order." But Russia herself, throughout all her

vast country-side, her frowning forests, and her snow-covered steppes, slumbered, wrapt in soul-deadening superstition, and in stifling serfdom.

Not many years before the writer of these present pages was born, Nicholas Gogol had published in a novel, bearing the title *Dead Souls*, a remorseless satire on the society which battered and rotted on the sale and barter of their fellow creatures. The form of serfdom which prevailed in Russia sprang up in the sixteenth century, and became consecrated by law in the seventeenth; but it took a hundred and fifty years to attain its full growth, and assume the forms satirised by the pen of Nicholas Gogol. The relations between masters and serfs were, in the nineteenth century, regulated by what were termed "inventories," or lists of "souls," which lists were kept by the various proprietors, and checked from time to time by agents of the Government. This process of checking being irregular both in its occurrence and in its action, Gogol conceived the idea of showing up the whole degrading system by introducing in his novel a trader travelling through Russia, buying up on paper

the "dead souls," or the names of the serfs who had died since the last inventory was taken; and then re-selling them, with the ostensible object of settling them on an estate, which also, in its turn, only existed on paper. The portraits of the various serf proprietors with whom the traveller trades—notably that of Pliushkine the miser—are drawn with a master hand, and it is difficult to say which of them is the most repulsive. Turgénieff, who continued and developed the school of novelists founded by Gogol, succeeded in his writings in freeing to a greater extent both the medium in which he wrote, and the art through which he expressed himself. His *Memoirs of a Sportsman* was almost the first literary introduction of the Russian moujik in the guise of a sentient, reasoning human being. Turgénieff's youth had been saddened by witnessing many scenes of stupid and thoughtless cruelty towards household and peasant serfs; for he was the son of a wealthy landowner; and his mother, a proud and prejudiced "wealthy lady of the old school," held it in no ways derogatory to her womanhood to ill-treat and even brutalise her men, women, and children serfs. When it is remembered

that serfdom existed till within such recent times throughout the length and breadth of Russia, that it was so inextricably, and, though gruesomely, yet often picturesquely, interwoven into the life of the nation ; that no less than forty millions of serfs were liberated in 1861, it will not be so difficult to understand that the system has left a certain lingering psychology among all classes, the descendants of the masters no less than the descendants of the household serfs, who became the proletariat of the towns ; and the peasant serfs, who remained on the land.

Those were days when but little money was in current use in the household of the landed proprietor ; nearly everything was produced and manufactured on the estates of the landed gentry, and the few commodities, such as sugar, or foreign wines, bought for the table of "the masters," were looked upon as rare and precious luxuries to be dealt with and accounted for with the utmost housewifely care. These recollections give incidentally valuable side-lights on the domestic economy of the times, when home industries still held the field, and supplied with food and clothing, without the aid of middlemen,

the greater part of the population. Enormous quantities of fruit and cucumbers were preserved, pickled and stored away for winter use in the mysterious store-rooms of Arina, "the viper"; rabbits of a special breed were raised for their long, soft fur, which made comfortable warm shawls; endless stockings were knitted by the little girl serfs, stores of linen were spun in the *isbas*, and yards of delicate embroidery were worked by the elder girls and women serfs in the embroidery rooms—the description of which reminds English readers of the times when Lancastrian and Tudor ladies kept trains of waiting women and maids busy in their bowers, reproducing with deft, but tired fingers, in endless tapestries, scenes of hunting, war, and of knightly exploits.

The character sketches of serfs and of freed serfs who move and live in these pages are no pale and ineffectual shadows, but we recognise them at once as counterparts of our own old servants' hall retainers; the privileged and beloved nurse, the unintelligent but worldly wise under-servant, who never sees anything or hears anything that it may be inconvenient to see or hear. The delicate impressionist sketch

of the mysterious Sava the night-watchman, whose name pronounced in the depths of the night gave the imaginative child the sensation of the wafting of wings, and called up before her eyes a tall, white, radiant figure with a spear, like the picture she had seen of the archangel Michael, deals tenderly with the worn-out beliefs and the exquisite mysticisms of the peasant soul, and gives us the key to much that reveals itself in the soul of modern Russia. In the story of "The Cat's Away" we feel the whole atmosphere of demoralisation which pervades a household when "the masters" are out for the day; the banging doors, the whistling in the dining-room, the squeaking tones of the concertina played by "Big Elisar" in the stable yard, all lead up to our sharing in the clandestine enjoyment of the little girl, as she watches the stamping, whirling and bewildering agility of the "maddening Trepack dance," and shares with the peasants the intoxication of the unequal rhythm of the elemental music, which seemed "to penetrate through the pores of the skin into the body, bringing with it a breath of madness." A quaintly malicious touch at the end of this story suggests that the passing outburst of de-

moralisation "below stairs" was but a reflection of the "*mœurs très relâchés*" of the masters themselves, and when one remembers what the state of slavery or serfdom means to women, it is not surprising to learn that a large number of the children in the village and household bore "a striking resemblance to uncle Constantine." But towering above all the slighter and less worthy figures in the background, stands out the imposing figure of "Niania," the tall, withered old nurse, "with a profile that looked as if it had been carved with a hatchet out of a piece of rock." In the final sketch, which bears as title "February 19, 1861" (a date enshrined in the memory of every free Russian), we read how the children committed to Niania's care, and who as yet understood nothing of the reason of their prayer, were bidden by this old freed woman serf, who "was born to bring up free men," to prostrate themselves three times night and morning, and to repeat "Deliver, O Lord, the peasants!" This beloved "Niania," Pélagia Mikhailovna, was the comforter and adviser of the little girl, and her refuge from the tasks and conventional decorum of Mademoiselle Renault, the French governess. We know from

the pages of Turgénieff in what respect and love these "Nianias," who held such important positions in the bygone *régime* of Russian country life, were held by their charges, who often found in them a true motherliness which was lacking in the proud lady mother, corrupted by the abuse of absolute authority over the life and fortunes of other and enslaved human beings. The present character sketch of Pélagia Mikhailovna, as she lives in the memory of a Russian grandmother, who has passed the greater part of her life in exile from her home, because she could not forget the lessons of freedom learnt at the knees of the old and venerable freed serf, will, I believe, live also in the pages of literature, as that of one of the beautiful and freedom-loving souls who are ever "praying silently with their people."

Since the historic freeing of the serfs, and the establishment of the *Zemstvos* by Alexander II., Russia has begun to awake from her troubled sleep. The heavy hand of a nightmare is still on her, and she stirs and moans painfully, flinging out a protesting, appealing arm as the red lurid dream convulses her suffering frame. Europe watches anxiously the awakening of the

giant, and listens for the slightest whisper that shall tell of the night which is passing, and of the dawn that is breaking. It is in the hope that these pages may be one of those whispers that they are offered at this moment to the English public.

One word of personal explanation. The title of this little book goes forth to the world inscribed with the names of a Russian and of an English woman writer; though only one of them could recall and record what its pages contain. But a union of souls may result at times in an intellectual and artistic conception, which shall some day develop into a cherished literary child; whilst the rustle of the winged presence announcing its birth may be but the intimate, homely scratching of the ink-laden goose-quill, held at times by one parent, at times by the other, as it toils and splutters over the lamp-lit page.

In the early days of the spring of this year I was staying with my friend in Paris, and in the intervals of talking over days that were past, over the future of our children, who were marrying and going out into the world, over the fate of our spiritual children—our writings,

our imaginings, our aspirations—she read me, what to my mind is the very beautiful impressionist sketch of her recollections, as a child of eleven, of the freeing of the Russian serfs—the sketch which appears as the closing scene in the present volume. “Why do you not write more in the same style?” I exclaimed. “You remember so tenderly, you reproduce so vividly; I am convinced by what you have just read me, you must have stores of similar recollections at the back of your mind.” Thus the idea of this book was born and grew. Just as Robert H. Sherard and Alphonse Daudet collaborated some years ago on a book which bore the title of *My First Voyage*, one telling the story of his youth, while the other wrote a kind of *roman-interview*, so my friend and I have collaborated—sometimes in the *appartement* at Passy, sometimes in my study, overlooking the ebbing and flowing Thames, where the sea-gulls swoop and dive, where the brown-sailed barges glide, deep-laden towards the sea, and where at night green, red and yellow lights make a Whistler’s “Nocturne” in the shimmering restless water. “La Tamise terrible,” she has named it, when the spring

tide comes swelling up with the youthful ardour of the early year; and watching it—we have woven into its resistless flood the symbolism of the freedom which, in its equally resistless flow, is spreading its flood-tide over her own beloved Russia.

DORA B. MONTEFIORE.

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‘WE START FOR THE
COUNTRY’

I

‘ WE START FOR THE COUNTRY ’

THE great news of the day for us children is that the double windows are to be removed ! The workman arrives ; we stand around him, watching every movement of his tool. Bits of dried putty are scattered around, and fall to the ground ; we pick them up as if they were precious stones. How many hours had I not passed during the long winter watching through the window the layer of fine sand between the outer and the inner glass, the little paper baskets filled with salt, and the dried carcasses of the dead flies which lay scattered over this small Sahara. Another moment, and I shall be able to hold in my hand those mysterious little baskets with their dusty salt contents.¹

¹ Double windows (the inner ones removable in the spring) are used throughout northern Russia during the long and severe winters. The sand and the salt alluded to are placed between the windows to catch the moisture.

“Take care!” some one calls out.

The pane of glass moves, and threatens to fall; we jump to one side; the workman, like the giant that he is, catches it, and places it against the wall. The sand, the mysterious little baskets, and the melancholy carcases of the flies fall, alas! under the merciless sweep of the tool, into a large basket which is waiting for them. The fastening of the outer window scrapes and groans, as if annoyed at being disturbed after the long winter slumber, and the window flies open! The room is immediately filled with the noise of the street, and flooded with fresh damp air, heavy with the smell of the earth and of melting snow. Spring has come.

It is not a swallow that brings us the first message of spring, but the coachman Tarass, with three horses and an immense carriage, a sort of primitive landau without springs, built to meet the exigencies of the long and abominable roads on which it has to travel. But no royal coach could equal in my eyes the majesty of this stupendous vehicle.

Tarass, tall, dark, taciturn, frequently drunk, came into the hall. My mother condescended

to give him her hand to kiss ; asked him whether the roads were yet passable, and if the bridges were safe. Then Tarass disappeared into the courtyard, and the whole household, not excepting us children, passed into a state of feverish restlessness. The maids ran up and down stairs with piles of linen, and with my mother's starched petticoats and white dressing-jackets. Washing dresses were hastily tried on and alterations made. Huge trunks stood open all day in the bedrooms, looking like mysterious monsters stuffed with flounces and furbelows. Groceries and provisions of all sorts stood about on the tables, waiting to be packed in the recesses of the carriage. The whole house began to look like a camp, and we children roamed about, idle and undisciplined, in the midst of this general confusion, stuffing our favourite but dilapidated toys into one or other of the trunks, from which they were immediately and indignantly routed out by my mother's maid. Punishments were lavishly threatened, but their administration was forgotten ; there was really too much to do without looking after us. Our special delight was to creep down a certain passage, where there was

an inside window looking on to the kitchen. There, the huge Tarass, in a red blouse, and without his kaftan, was seated, eating slowly and solemnly with a yellow wooden spoon a plate of soup, which stood smoking in front of him in a wooden painted bowl. Every one around him was laughing and chattering, but he alone was silent ; he continued to eat, as if performing a solemn rite.

“ When are we going ? ”

“ When everything is ready ; when the horses are rested.”

How stupid grown-up people are ! They are actually opening a box that had once been closed and locked, and all its contents are being taken out again, because the maid has packed up in it one of my mother’s dresses, which she requires for the journey. The maid is crying.

“ What are you crying for, Gania ? ”

But a hand is placed on my shoulder. It is Mademoiselle Renault, our governess, who remarks in freezing accents—

“ Go up-stairs to your room, Sacha ; you have no business here.”

There is no question, of course, just now, of lessons ; but neither is there the delightful

feeling of real holiday time. When one has watched all the preparations ; when one has packed at least half-a-dozen times all one's things—only to have them tossed out again each time—what is there left to do ? It's something like a holiday, and yet it's not a holiday ! Whenever shall we start ? Tarass is called up into the bedrooms, and consulted as to the weight of the trunks. He says he can manage to take them, as long as there are no more added at the last moment. We run after him.

“ Tarass ! I say, Tarass ! Are the horses rested ? Are we soon going to start ? ”

He looks down on us ; his black beard spreads over his wide chest, and an odour quite peculiar to himself pervades the whole atmosphere round him. A hoarse and, as it seems to us, distant voice replies—

“ When Madame gives the orders.”

It seems we are off to-morrow. They put us to bed an hour earlier than usual, and tell us that we must be up to-morrow very, very early, so as to do the first stage before midday. I make up my mind that I won't go to sleep at all. It's just possible they might forget

to wake us ; perhaps even they might start without us—such things have happened before now. I have not forgotten that on my birthday, when we had a children's party, they forgot to give me some sweets ! I said nothing at the time, and I did not ask for any, but it made a deep impression on my mind. Children are often forgotten, and then gypsies pick them up, and teach them to be acrobats. Gypsies steal horses and fowls also ; and they are dark like Tarass. Supposing Tarass is a gypsy, who will steal us all to-morrow ! He would put us into the coach-house with the carriages. We should get to the country all the same, but we should have to live in the coach-house. The little lamp burns in front of the icons with a soft, sad light, and the tiny flame quivers and flickers on the gold and silver background of the picture of the tall, strange Virgin, whose eyes always follow me. I stare with unblinking eyes at the little lamp. No, I must *not* go to sleep, because to-morrow we start.

“ Get up ! Get up quickly ! The horses are being harnessed ! ” It is the voice of our nurse, who has come to wake us up.

I make one spring, and am out of bed. Never

before had I seen our room in this pale yellow light ; never had I caught sight through the windows of this flushed, golden sky ! In the house can be heard the sound of heavy footsteps, of shouting voices, of slamming doors ; and outside rises now and then a vague clash of little bells. I understand with a flash that the carriage is being loaded up, and the final preparations made. Down-stairs, in the dining-room, breakfast is laid. The hall is filled with parcels, bundles and baskets. Mamma is very worried, and not in the best of tempers. My father remarks that they will never be able to get all these parcels into one carriage. Through the window I catch sight of the “tarantasse,” the famous carriage. Tarass, majestic and commanding, in kaftan and black hat, points with the end of his whip to the various places where the trunks can be placed. The shops are not yet opened, but some early loungers stand and watch the loading of the carriage, and offer advice.

We sit down to breakfast. At the last moment the discovery is made that it is impossible to take all the luggage with us, and the question is discussed what can be left behind

for the maid to bring after us two days later, with the heavy luggage. Some peasants' horses have been brought from the country for the purpose of transporting the maid and the heavy luggage. I begin to speculate whether a favourite doll, which I succeeded, after many futile attempts, in smuggling into one of the boxes, will travel with us, or will remain behind for the maid to bring on. If fate decrees it is to be left to the tender mercies of the maid, then good-bye to my poor doll!

"Sit down, all of you, before starting!" and we all assemble in the dining-room, and seat ourselves. After a moment's silence, my mother rises, and, turning towards an icon in the corner, makes the sign of the cross. All mutter a short prayer, and I cross myself, looking out of the window all the time. Mamma, with tears in her eyes, kisses my father. Every one seems to feel the parting. Suddenly a feeling of terror, as if overwhelmed with the expectation of some great danger, takes possession of me. In a flash I seem to see the long road—the possible robbers—yes, there are always robbers on the long highroad. I seem to have the key which explains the mysterious

emotion that has taken possession of every one, and I cross myself furtively, and murmur—
“Preserve us from robbers, great God!”

We go down-stairs; I follow with a resolute and serious countenance, holding my two brothers by the hand, while making strenuous resolves to defend them from the robbers; for were not my brothers small, and not yet wise enough to understand?

We scramble into the carriage; mamma and mademoiselle facing the horses, our old nurse and ourselves on the seat opposite. Though the carriage is an enormous one, it is so piled up with parcels, bundles and baskets, that there is scarcely room to sit. Mademoiselle Renault faces us with pinched lips, for she finds it difficult to sit comfortably with a bundle sticking into her back. Mamma, who grows more worried every moment, forgets that we are near, and remarks in Russian that “the young person is too fussy and difficult to please.” At last we settle ourselves.

“Go, Tarass!” says mamma.

Tarass takes off his hat, makes the sign of the cross three times, and gathers up the reins.

"Now then, my friends!" he calls to the horses.

The carriage moves, the bells tinkle, the horses' hoofs strike the paving stones of the Muscovite roadway, we are shaken, jolted, thrown from one side to another. My father, with a smile that appears to me to be too gay for the occasion, waves his fine white hand with a farewell gesture; the passers by, who have already increased in number, watch us as we drive away. I feel an intense pride at the thought of driving in such an extraordinary carriage—"the state coach of our grandmother." We turn into another road. We have lived through the past; now, nothing but the future lies before us; a future, splendid, unknown, full of unlooked-for adventures, in an undreamt-of world, peopled with supernatural beings.

The houses seem to rush past us like a multi-coloured river. From time to time giddiness overcomes me, and cold perspiration covers my forehead; my hands are cold. In the bustle of getting away they quite forgot that I could not drive with my back to the horses. I am feeling sick.

"Tarass! Stop! stop!"

A huge white linen bag is dragged out from the depths of the seat, whilst Mademoiselle Renault, ever keen to foresee a possible disaster, keeps my head well over the side of the carriage. A box is produced from the white linen bag; peppermint lozenges, and as many of them as I like. I am squeezed in on the front seat between mamma and Mademoiselle Renault.

“All right, Tarass!”

Once more the houses flash by to the right and the left; once more the bells tinkle, but their sound seems now far away, and less distinct; the sun warms and envelopes me in a golden glow. My head falls forward. I open my eyes to take another look at the houses streaming past to the left and to the right. A hand gently pushes towards me a cushion. I sleep, and I am conscious that I sleep.

THE ARRIVAL

II

THE ARRIVAL

OH! the never-to-be-forgotten charm of the first hours of our journey, once the town is left behind. The wind, laden with the heavy perfumes of the awakening earth, sweeps ceaselessly by. The reddish-brown fields stretch in narrow strips towards the horizon, and seem, as the carriage passes rapidly by, to fall behind us; the meadows clothed in fresh green, and starred with the brilliant yellow of the dandelions, stretch wide on either side like expanses of green, rolling water. The sign-posts, painted white, black and red, point out the way, and tell the distances. They stand up, tall and inaccessible, like guardian giants placed at rare intervals. The large bell attached to the douga of the middle horse, rings incessantly to the running accompaniment of the tinkling little bells which cover the harness of all three horses.

When we travel fast the silvery ding-dong of the large bell is deafening ; now it warns like a tocsin, now it threatens ; then it sings a song of victory, and defies all dangers. When we go at a walking pace its sound is sharp and plaintive, and the tinkle of the little bells is more plainly heard, as they chatter together and tell each other quaint stories. One of the horses, bothered by a fly, shakes its head impatiently, and the little bells burst into wild laughter. Round and round, without ever stopping, goes the front wheel, and round and round the wheel fly little lumps of mud. The flies follow the carriage in a cloud ; now and then a huge humble-bee flies over our heads, and disappears behind the carriage, just as the fields, the meadows, the sign-posts, the carts we pass full of unknown peasants, who greet us as they go by, just as all the other beautiful things one passes on the high road disappear. The road itself seems to vanish behind us, but stretches ever ahead, straight and wide in the part where we are passing, but narrow and ever narrower towards a horizon that encircles us with a fixed, changeless outline.

My legs get cramped ; my eyes, tired by the

constant passing of a multitude of objects, search in vain for repose ; my body grows weary and heavy. I try to swing my legs, but only succeed in kicking my brother who is sitting opposite. He whimpers—not because I have hurt him, but because, tired out, just as I am, with having to keep still so long, he finds relief in tears.

“Sit still !”

“Good gracious ! what a tiresome child !” and I am inexorably pushed to the back of the seat.

If only I and my brothers could undertake this journey alone, without these grown-up people. We might perhaps take our old nurse. How delightful it would be ! We might then have got down, and run along the road for a little way ; we might even have collected some nice mud pies from the mud constantly thrown up from the wheels. As I sit crushed up behind my mother, I notice a silk fringe that hangs from her shawl.

I make a little plait of the hanging fringe, then another one, then a third. There must be some more peppermint lozenges somewhere at the bottom of the carriage. I begin to whine, and I pretend I feel sick. They watch me

closely, and then tell me that we are not far from a village, where we shall stop, and where I shall be able to get over my sickness. Tarass shouts—"Get up! get up! my friends." The horses start, arch their necks; the douga bell rings, the little harness bells tinkle, the mud flies from the wheels, the fields, one by one, come nearer and nearer, then disappear in the distance; the wind blows fresher and fresher; my head swims, my eyes grow drowsy, I no longer distinguish sounds distinctly, I seem to be floating among the clouds, which are bells, and which ring, ring, ring.

My hat has fallen off, and the sun strikes straight down on my head. I really feel sick, for I am hungry, I am thirsty, I want to run, to jump, to shout. A long string of heavily-laden carts pass by slowly, the peasants walking at the horses' heads. As we flash by them we observe in the distance something grey. It is a village; it grows nearer. Now we pass on either side of the road little grey cottages, with three tiny windows. Groups of barefooted children run after us, dogs bark at the horses, women standing at their doors shade their eyes with their hands in order to see us better, and

then bow as we pass. Tarass shouts louder and louder ; then with a sudden and skilful turn of the reins he pulls up the horses in front of the village inn.

At last ! At last we can get out of the carriage ; we can feel once more the solid ground under our feet. It is the first stopping-place. We eat our provisions, and rest three hours at the inn. Then we start again, and as long as the daylight lasts the same infinite procession of fields rolls past and disappears behind us ; the long straight road unrolls in front of us, and we see ever ahead the same narrow strip, stretching towards the same encircling, fixed and changeless horizon.

Finally the acute joy of the start in the early morning, and of the drive in the marvellous carriage, becomes merged in the idea of a punishment ; the drive had become an annoying but inevitable necessity.

Neither does our first real stoppage in the little town of B—— afford us any solid pleasure. Life there is not half so pleasant even as at Moscow. The mistress of the house, a cousin of my mother's, shares the home with her father, an old paralyzed General. The house is large,

the floors, covered down the middle with strips of white drugget, shine like looking-glasses. All the servants wear slippers, so as not to make any noise when they walk. Every one speaks in a low voice, for the General does not like noise. We are kept up-stairs. I happened to know that the General fought against the French when they burnt Moscow, and I am filled with astonishment because he does not show any burning desire to kill Mademoiselle Renault, who is French, and who accompanied us to the drawing-room when we came to make our bows and curtseys. In this horrid house, not only have we to remain quietly in our room on the second floor, but we have to be clean all day, for at any moment a man-servant may come up-stairs and call us down into the drawing-room. There we find ladies and old gentlemen. We have to curtsey, kiss the hands of various aunts, and then leave the room without running, and without making any noise.

Our next long stoppage is in the town of K——.

Here everything is different, and it is almost like being in the country: We find here our two young cousins, who are only waiting for

our arrival to accompany us to our grandmother's house. The garden here is small, but the huge orchard stretches right away to the walls of an old fortress, where there is a ruined tower. It is true we are forbidden to go into this orchard, but our old nurse is busy talking to friends among our aunt's servants, and Mademoiselle Renault is chatting in the little garden with officers, who come here every day.

Our cousins have not been brought up as we have been. Happy mortals! They have no governess, and they do just as they like, especially Peter, who is a year older than I am, and my grandmother's favourite. There had been a time when he was so ill, so very ill, that he was kept for weeks in cotton-wool, and with hot bottles all round him. I often asked him if it was pleasant living in cotton-wool, and amongst hot-water bottles; but he always declared it was not true, and that he had never lived in cotton-wool.

Peter often goes to the country house; it belongs to him; and grandmamma, when she speaks of it, always says "Peter's estate." He knows all about it too; how many horses and

cows are born each year, how many pigs are killed at Christmas time. He has told me several times that he can harness and unharness a horse just as well as Tarass can ; that, it seems to me, must be an exaggeration. But what is most striking is that he is allowed to do whatever he chooses ; he may eat sweets all day long, may refuse soup when he is not hungry ; he is not even obliged to do lessons—and he never does any. He can neither read nor write, and the grown-up people say that he must not be over-tired by being forced to do lessons till he is twelve years old.

Under Peter's protection we roam about together—in the courtyard, in the stables, and even in the orchard. His nurse, who follows us about everywhere, remarks timidly every now and then—

“Madame, your aunt has forbidden your cousins to go into the orchard.”

And Peter replies—

“Shut up, you stupid !”

And we follow him into the orchard, proud of his and of our own courage.

At first it is very amusing ; but that wears off after a time. When one has seen everything

in the courtyard and in the orchard, time, once more, begins to hang heavy on one's hands. We have no toys of our own, and Peter's and his brother's toys are broken. A toy that one breaks oneself appears in the light of a transformation—thus a horse with all its legs broken off is easily turned into a boat. But toys broken by others are lifeless corpses !

Soon I find myself longing for a fresh start, with the same impatience as that which I experienced at Moscow. I suggest the idea to Peter that we should start at once ; for he has several times told me it is he who fixes the time for going into the country. But I find, to my disappointment, that my mother's word is still supreme. When Peter tries to insist upon our leaving, when he screams, stamps, is rude to his mother, mamma declares that she will stay another month if she chooses, and that Peter deserves to be whipped. This incident brings clearly before me the prestige that is inherent in power, and I feel saddened.

At last we are told we are to start to-morrow. I make up my mind that the programme will be the same as at Moscow, and that we shall leave quite early in the morning. But I am dis-

appointed. Mamma (probably with the idea of snubbing Peter) announces that we shall start in the afternoon. I also hear a whisper that Tarass is dead drunk, and can't be got on his legs. Mamma will never allow any other coachman to drive her ; she says that there is no other coachman who understands driving down the "mountains," or crossing the "Gaty,"¹ without upsetting and smashing the carriage. In the afternoon mamma puts on her blue muslin dress, her crêpe-de-chine shawl, her bonnet trimmed with little roses, and goes out with my aunt—we are not told where. They return at five o'clock ! Tarass is still sleeping. Finally my uncle orders him to be beaten till he wakes up. I tremble with horror at the thought of Tarass being beaten. I cannot say what happened, but I know this, that the horses were put to, and that we started. Our carriage went first, and was followed by one in which were seated my aunt, my cousins, and two maids. It was nearly seven o'clock.

The day was declining, the deep yellow sun was setting ; the trees bordering the high-road

¹ Roads across the marshes, formed of trunks of trees and of branches.

near the town threw long shadows. The road we were now on was not straight; it turned with many windings, now disappearing, now re-appearing. We are really now on our way to the country; yes, and we shall soon be there. When, oh! when shall we get there? There are two douga bells ringing now; the little harness bells tinkle; the front wheel turns—turns!

Suddenly my mother cries out with alarm—
“Tarass! stop! stop!”

The reins are gathered up, and the carriage brought to a standstill.

“What is the matter?” asks my aunt from the other carriage.

My mother does not reply, but gets out, and makes us do the same. Mademoiselle Renault, with a pout of contempt, gets down with us. We have reached the “mountain,” a little hill by the river side, the road down which leads to a bridge of which my mother stands in terrible fear. It is known as the “living bridge,” because it is opened twice a day to let the barges pass. What a bridge of wonder it is for us! My aunt smiles and remains in the carriage; we follow on foot. Our carriage and

horses pass us, cross the bridge, and, as my mother walks very slowly, remain waiting for us on the other side. She carefully avoids all the spots on the bridge where there are cracks between the planks. Once more we pack ourselves into the carriage, and I experience the feeling that we have escaped a great danger. I also feel enormous admiration for my aunt's heroism, and, if it must be confessed, a slight feeling of shame for my mother.

Now the sun is quite close to the horizon ; it is red, and we can look it full in the face, and watch its slow sinking movement. The distant fields are flooded with red light.

"Now then, my friends !" cries Tarass, and we bowl along through a village.

A flock, returning from the pasture, blocks the straight line of the only road. Scared women, with sticks in their hands, rush out in search of their animals, screaming in harsh, incomprehensible words. The sheep bleat, and from time to time we hear the prolonged low of a cow. As we leave the village behind, silence once more settles down on the whole scene. The wheels pass noiselessly over the soft black earth, which muffles the sound of the horses'

hoofs. Soon we leave the high-road for a cross-country track ; and nothing then is heard but the ding-dong of the douga bell, and the tinkle of the little harness bells.

Now the sun has set, and the distance stands out in a dark sky-line ; the circle of the horizon seems to grow narrower ; the dark shadow of some unseen object spreads over the whole earth. Night falls : it seems to fall from the sky, which suddenly disappears, and opening, discloses an unexpected immensity of dark blue depths sown with small and large stars, and streaked with luminous white tracks. Now the horses fall into a trot ; now they are walking. The carriage sways gently from side to side as we pass over the ruts. Darkness closes in on all sides ; huge forms, vague, surging and black, seem to move towards us ; they are trees which stand up here and there in the parched grey fields. It is cool now, but from time to time there rises from the earth a puff of warm air, laden with a honey-sweet smell, which spreads around with a sigh of sensuous relief. A feeling of fear pervades my whole being. The carriage is so small, so lonely, in the midst of this immeasurable night, which whispers, stirs,

breathes and beckons. I fear to look either to right or left. I glance at the face of my old nurse, which seems to me almost luminous, so white is it against the black background of the seat. Both my brothers are asleep, the younger on the nurse's lap, and the elder one stretched out on the seat. A corner is arranged for me, with a cushion for my head, behind Mademoiselle Renault and mamma; but I cannot sleep. Night seems to have dropped down on to the earth, and the sky is clear. The stars which twinkle and move are quite close, but the sky is far away, and seems to grow ever further. I feel as if we were getting ever further and further away from that transparent sky, where live God, the angels, and the six-winged seraphim. The thought comes to me that we ought to be able to see them, as the sky is so clear. But the more I try to penetrate behind this transparent vault overhead, the further and ever further we seem to be travelling away from it.

Suddenly the black terrible night invades everything, even the sky, which appears now like a narrow strip between the two dark walls of night. I jump up terrified. My heart seems

to cease beating. But no—these are not the walls of night; they are forests of pine trees. The air is warm, there is a strong resinous smell, the road is as white as snow, and huge trees stretch their boughs like the hairy paws of a bear over our heads. The horses settle down to a walk, for these white sandy roads make heavy going for the old-fashioned carriage.

We pass villages, plunged in sleep and wrapped in darkness. The little black cottages are huddled together, the small windows looking like closed eyes. The dogs bark furiously behind the wooden yard doors. Now and then a tiny window is pushed up, and then immediately closed. How many villages have we passed? When shall we get there?

So time goes on. Now the horses are once more trotting, and the bells go tinkle, tinkle; the stars shine and sparkle in a sky which is already less transparent, darker, and even further away.

“Now then, my friends!” cries Tarass.

The horses break into a gallop. Faster and ever faster we travel. Here is N—— at last! I recognize my nurse's cottage; and there is the little chapel that is only opened once a year on

the feast of St. Nicholas. We turn into a drive with trees on either side, and suddenly to the left appears the great grey house. All the down-stairs windows are lit up. Servants surround the carriage ; on the steps grandmamma, in her dressing-gown, is watching our arrival.

Now we are in the hall, and now we pass into the great yellow dining-room. The table is laid ; the candles throw a reddish glow on the cloth, which is as white as the forest road ; the silver shines ; the crystal bowls, filled with preserves, sparkle. Two windows stand open, and through them can be seen the green branches, which, lit up by the light inside, stand out against the dark night without.

TO ANTONIO ELSEÑOR

'I GET UP WITH THE SUN'

III

‘ I GET UP WITH THE SUN ’

“ TO-MORROW, I shall get up with the sun, for I am going into the town,” remarks one of the servants to another, just as we were passing through the hall to go up-stairs to our rooms.

“ To be up with the sun ! ” I repeated to myself.

Ambition, that tendency we have to accomplish an action, to do a deed beyond our ordinary strength ; which ambition is the source of all our glories and of all our misfortunes, is kindled within me. To get up with the sun ! What a dream ; what a goal to one’s ambition !

I fall asleep with the firm determination only to wake up with the sun, which has retired to rest beneath the earth. Its bed-cover is not like mine, for it is yellow or red, and it sinks and moves with the cloud canopy. I have a fancy for comparing the doings of the sun with

my own doings—"To-morrow the sun will lift up his head in the morning ; so shall I. He will sit on the edge of his cloud canopy, as I shall sit on the edge of my bed. Suddenly, he will shoot up into the sky ; and I shall do the same."

After all, it is the sun who wakes *me* up the next morning, and who is looking down at me from the sky, whilst I am still in bed. He floods the room with light, blinds me, and makes my cheeks burn. What a disappointment ! I did not manage to get up with the sun, after all !

Every one, even our old nurse who shares our room, is still sleeping. I have never seen her asleep before, and I watch her for some time, as I would a rare and curious object. Her somewhat hard, reddish-brown profile stands out against the pale green of the wall, and her face, which I am in the habit of seeing from below, seems, as I observe it now, to be softer in outline, and less imposing. Suddenly, it flashes across me that this early awakening may enable me to enjoy a most agreeable adventure. Once dressed I can roam about wherever I choose.

I throw on my things in feverish haste, but at

the same time taking great care not to make any noise ; my stockings are pulled on wrong side outwards ; my shoes are not fastened ; the many buttons which should close the back of my dress remain undone, and hooks and strings are fastened anywhere at hazard. What does it matter ? I decide at the last moment to take off my shoes. This journey shall be made in stockings only—for a journey I mean it shall be ! I have not yet decided where I shall go ; it is to be a journey of exploration, and I feel I am accomplishing a bold and dangerous action.

I slip into the next room, where stand in long rows, numbers of embroidery frames. In the day time I have been in the habit of seeing rows of women serfs stooping over these frames ; whilst in the corners little girls were employed at knitting interminable stockings. Now, no human being is in the room. I look out of the window, whilst arranging my plans of action, and I watch what is going on outside. The tops of four pine trees planted in front of the terrace, reach to the upper storey ; the garden, a perfect forest of cherry trees, flecked with the snow of their white spring blossoms, slopes in a gentle declivity towards the fields, which seem

to stretch out endlessly to the uttermost ends of the world—that distant country where the women turn their spinning wheels in the skies ; a story which must be true, for I have read it myself in a book. Right away, in the far, far distance, I can just distinguish the willow trees, like the trees in the toy farm which was given to me at Christmas time. I make up my mind I will wander as far as those trees, and see what is going on there.

Something in the room gives a crack. I start away from the window, for that is the room where Mademoiselle Renault is sleeping, and my instinct tells me it will be prudent to put a certain distance between myself and the enemy in ambuscade.

I move quietly into the next room, which is a sort of passage-room, opening on to several others, and on to a narrow wooden staircase, which leads down into the serving-room. On the threshold of this passage-room I stumble over a sleeping form stretched out on a mattress. It is a female servant, who opens her eyes, and looks at me with a half-awakened, stupid glance.

“Where are you going, mademoiselle?”

I stoop down, and whisper in her ear.

“Don’t say a word; I will come back.”

She turns over, and goes to sleep again. Then I observe with surprise that about a dozen half-clothed women servants are lying, stretched out on mattresses in different parts of the room. Over there I see Dounia, the little fair-haired embroidery girl, who gave me yesterday a small tube made out of a part of a goose’s throat. She used it for winding her embroidery thread, and as there are small peas inside it, the bobbins of thread make a pleasant little noise when they are being unwound.

This, then, is where the servants sleep. How often had I wondered where they all went at night, these women serfs attached to the household service. I creep down the great staircase, and peep into the store-room. A door, which is generally closed, stands open, and the deliciously intoxicating perfume that I always associate with this room fills my nostrils, and is an agreeable change after the somewhat faint smell of not over-clean human bodies, that I had just left behind me in the passage-room.

This is a mingled perfume of spices, wine, honey, and vinegar; and it comes from the region

where the terrible being Arina reigns supreme. Arina is always dressed in black, with her head tied up in a little black handkerchief, spotted with white flowers, which is fastened under her chin with a pin. This handkerchief frames austere her cadaverous face, with its toothless mouth and its thin bluish lips. The clink of the numerous and various sized keys, which she always carries about with her, announces, in the usual way, her approach ; and at that sound the women servants, the coachmen, the cooks, cease their chatter, and wear a constrained look ; it is evident that there is a good reason for my nurse having given this old retainer the nickname of "the viper." Grandmamma, however, seems to be fond of her. Every evening Arina, "the viper," goes into grandmamma's bedroom, and never leaves it till late at night. The servants whisper among themselves that she "is giving in her report ;" and their looks, when they speak of her, are full of hatred and mystery, mingled with fear. This fear I cannot help sharing, though I really have no reason for doing so ; as numbers of the good things that I enjoy come by way of Arina, "the viper." Jam, honey (with that delicious acid taste which

grown-up people never care for), salted apples (juicy, yellow and transparent), and sometimes even a dried prune, or a piece of sugar, are some of the extra delicacies which Arina dispenses.

The door of this sanctum of hers standing open appears to me to be the next danger, for in all probability “the viper” is there. I am imprudent enough to attempt to run past it, so as to get into the garden through the other end of the hall. I hear the clink of her keys, and the next moment Arina herself appears at the open door. I dart behind another door. “Who is there?” she asks; and her small green eyes, half hidden by the red, inflamed eyelids, seem to pierce through the door behind which I am standing. I begin to tremble; I feel I am lost; I show myself.

“Arina! Don’t say anything; I will come back.”

“But where are you going?”

She takes me by the hand; and—oh, unexpected delight—she leads me into the still-room. Never before have I penetrated into this holy of holies! None of us children are allowed in it; not even Peter, since he ate up all the cherries that had been set on one

side for making liqueur ; and nearly died of his orgie. That sort of cherry, they tell us now, is poisonous, and Peter ate so many that he lay like dead for a whole day. What a day it was ! Grandmamma walked about the house crying and wringing her hands. Then suddenly Arina appeared, and threw herself at the feet of her mistress, imploring pardon. Grandmamma, with a terrible expression on her face, such as I had never seen there before, spurned the wretched Arina away with her foot. Half scared, and half indignant, I began to scream. Mademoiselle Renault carried me off to my room and locked me in. Towards evening, when it was certain that Peter was safe, every one began to discuss what had happened. The good kicking that Arina received was specially commented on, and the women servants appeared delighted. But our nurse, Pélagia Mikhailovna, seemed displeased ; and that evening, when mamma came into our bedroom to see that all was right, and made a remark about "the viper," Pélagia replied—"You do not really fear God ! You should have taken a rod, and have whipped this troublesome boy, who obeys no one !"

All this story flashes through my mind, and I whisper—

“Arina, don’t say anything; I will come back.”

I repeat this formula in a scared, stupid way; and at last, with an inspiration, I add—

“I forgot one of my copy-books, and left it in the drawing-room; and mademoiselle will scold me.”

Mademoiselle, or “mamzel,” as she was known among the servants, was not beloved of them. To invoke her name was generally the way to gain sympathy; especially among the elder servants, who failed to understand why “a German” (and for the Russian peasant every foreigner was “a German”) was allowed so much power over “the children of the nobility.”

Arina does not reply, and I fear to move, for I still feel doubtful as to the fate reserved for me. I glance nervously round the enormous room, one corner of which is boarded up half way to the ceiling, forming a huge receptacle for the mattresses, pillows and cushions used on great occasions, when they are needed for the numerous visitors who from time to time fill the house.

The shelves against the walls are stuffed with boxes, baskets, paper and linen bags, bottles, and pots of preserves. Standing on the ground are rows of narrow-necked bottles, and in a corner I observe the historic cherries in their reddish liqueur. Hastily I turn away from these dreaded death-traps. Dried bunches of mint and other herbs, and great skeins of flax hang down from the ceiling. Solid wooden chests painted red and green, and bound round with iron clamps, seem as if rooted to the floor of the store-room ; they appear to me like great overfed animals, heavy and satiated. With what mysteries am I not surrounded !

“ Be off with you quickly, before she is up ! ” said Arina at last. And now it is almost with regret that I leave the mysterious chamber, and move slowly towards the drawing-room, with the vague idea of looking for the copy-book which I have never lost, and have no hope of finding.

The blue drawing-room is lit up with the dim morning light. The furniture, covered with embroidery representing enormous white and red flowers on a drab background (the work of my grandmother), seems to wear a severe and

forbidding aspect ; surely my intrusion causes annoyance to these most correct chairs and sofas. The familiar perfume of dried roses in a shut-up room seems to plunge me instantly into an attitude of drawing-room manners ; I cease to feel at my ease. The portrait of my grandfather in uniform, a long pipe in his hand, appears more than usually lifelike, and I begin to dread lest I should see him move. The silence and the immobility of everything is so great that I can hear my heart beat. I turn to fly, but remain rooted to the spot. The great glass chandelier hanging from the centre of the ceiling shakes gently its lustrous prisms, like crystal tears which will not fall ; and, in spite of the oppressive solitude, I feel in every corner, under the huge sofa, and behind the rigid armchairs, a nameless presence. Quietly, and with a thousand choking fears, I open the door leading on to the terrace, and step out.

A breath of fresh damp air greets caressingly my cheeks ; the sparrows in the flowering lilac bushes twitter encouragingly their “joy of living ;” a flight of crows, whom my apparition disturbs, rise from the pines which fringe the

terrace, and hover above me, shrieking like angry fish-fags ; the rays of the sun wrap me in delicious warmth ; the blossoms in the flower-beds greet my mad career, as I run along the yellow sandy paths. On the further side of a lawn, where the grass is growing high and rank, I reach a little clump of limes. Once there I feel in safety, and free from any indiscreet glances which, from the windows of the house, might follow my actions. Up to my waist my clothes are wet with dew ; I have lost a stocking, and as I plunge into the shade of the limes a cold shiver runs through my body. I sit for a few moments cross-legged, on a wooden seat, and try and warm my feet ; then I hastily pull off my remaining stocking, and run across another sunlit glade, leading to a small park, and beyond that into a wood. On and on I run, and scarcely seem to feel the ground beneath my feet. The fresh morning breeze carries me breathlessly forward, and I have no conscious sensation of either my legs, my arms, or of my body. But within my whole tingling being the birds sing, the trees sigh, the grass whispers, and the little dry branches crack. I feel green with the verdure of spring, and

fresh with the freshness of morning dew, and perfumed with wild reek of the woods, and I sing aloud a song of green leaves, of dewdrops, and of woodland happiness.

“Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle!”

My childish communings with nature are disturbed by loud imploring voices, that bring back with a rush the things of this world, and all their drab and commonplace prose.

The voices are those of the under-nurse Arishka, whom we call “Lilliput,” and of Dounia, the fair-haired embroidery girl. Then other voices—among them those of men—come wafted towards me. Surely I am being pursued.

As the full consciousness of what this means dawns upon me, I realize that my only safety lies in getting back as quickly as I can to the house, and confessing the whole thing to Pélagia Mikhailovna, who will understand the situation. I hide behind trees, and in bushes; I crawl on the ground, and through the undergrowth; I try to escape in the opposite direction to the voices. Vain efforts! The grown-ups are grown-ups after all; and they can see us anywhere, and we cannot escape.

“Come with me, mademoiselle.”

It is the voice of my grandmother's footman ; and he picks me up, and carries me towards the house.

“Who is looking for me ? Is it mamzel, or Niania ? ”

There is no reply, and I feel convinced it is mademoiselle.

After being washed, combed and dressed, I appear before the hated authority : my sentence is, “No pudding for dinner, and to write out twice the verbs ‘to run away’ and ‘to wander.’”

THE KITCHEN

IV

THE KITCHEN

IF "the powers that be" were in a good temper, the early morning breakfast taken with grandmamma was a delicious treat. First, there was all the delight of examining the Moscow "coffee-machine," a quite extraordinary apparatus, half of glass and half of metal; the coffee in this magic coffee-pot rose in a brown froth within the transparent part, and then disappeared—we never could discover where! Arina, "the viper," placed with due pomp this coffee-pot on the table, lit an invisible flame underneath, and stood at attention, watching the machine, till the operation was completed. Then she poured out grandmamma's coffee, who often remarked that "she only cared for coffee when she herself had prepared it." None of us children, however, had seen grandmamma preparing coffee, so it always

remained a wonder to us what the mysterious ceremony could be to which she referred.

Whilst grandmamma sipped leisurely the black liquid, which none of us young ones had ever tasted, we drank an infusion of black-currant leaves mixed with milk. This decoction we were forced to take, whether we liked it or not; for we were told "it was good for children, and was a preventive of scrofula." If, therefore, we drank this without making a fuss, and if grandmamma was in a good temper, we were allowed to eat as much fancy bread and as many cakes as we liked—biscuits, almond rolls, "galette" sprinkled with poppy seeds, sugar, and anise-seed, crisp pastries made up into the shape of little sticks or of knots, and yellow, crackling, lozenge-shaped rolls; all of which delicacies had been made in a small, low-pitched brown building in the corner of the courtyard—the kitchen. Grigori the cook reigned supreme in this kitchen, and ordered about the kitchen-maids, the peasants who worked under him, and all the other servants who composed his suite. This important personage prepared savoury dainties for the tea (which we children took in the place of late

dinner), and for the state dinners of grand-mamma, when the neighbours were invited to come and spend two or three days at N——. On these occasions no fewer than three tables were laid in the large dining-room; and we young ones, with the children who were visiting at the house, had our meals in “the tea-room.”

There were occasions, too, when one or other of our neighbours were giving “great dinner-parties,” when Grigori was “lent”; but these were quite exceptional occasions, such as when the archbishop, or some other great personage was on a visit in the neighbourhood; and—most important point—if grandmamma had no grievance against the neighbour who besought the “light and leading” of our far-famed Grigori.

Grigori, in fact, was such an important dignitary that every one, except grandmamma and my mother, gave him the ceremonious title of “Grigori Nikowitch,” instead of addressing him by his first name only. He and our nurse, Pélagia Mikhailovna, were the only two servants who enjoyed this rare privilege.

At the moment when Arina, who stood during breakfast behind grandmamma’s chair, poured out her second cup of coffee, Grigori

used to appear at the door. He was short, thick-set, red-faced, with long rough eyebrows, and hair turning grey ; he stood with eyes cast down, and his hands behind his back.

He always used the same formula : " What is it your pleasure to order for to-morrow ? " A solemn silence used to follow. Grand-mamma would look at mamma ; and finally a discussion would take place between the three. How delightful it was to hear all the details of to-morrow's dinner ! Grigori, in a low guttural voice, would pronounce the magic words : " Cut-lets à la Pojarsky." Had I not heard of the great Muscovite monument, " Minine and Pojarsky," and did not the word " Pojarsky " mean for me any monument in general ? Then what a remarkable dish that must be, which he was so constantly suggesting, but which mamma would never allow him to prepare. " The winds of Spain ! " Then the " Kisses," and the " Soufflets " of which he spoke ; not to mention the " Green surprises," and the " Sabayeuse sauce," and the potatoes " en robe de chambre," of which I was never tired of hearing ! These names seemed to me to stand for fantastic, living and mysterious beings, who possibly

might have their habitation in the kitchen. But lo, and behold, when the next day came, and I awaited feverishly the results of these most suggestive and appetite-provoking dishes—nothing extraordinary appeared on the table! Our menu seemed to consist as usual of two kinds of dishes—one kind unpleasant but enforced, such as soup and meat; the other kind most exquisite, but of which we had very small helpings—the various sweet dishes.

Grigori was quite a celebrity in the district, and there was good reason for it. During my grandfather's lifetime he had for some years studied culinary matters in the "English Club" in Moscow. Then he once more made his appearance at the country seat; not, it was alleged, willingly, but because he was brought back by force. He did not care for life in the country, and offered his master a large sum for his freedom. I never quite understood as a child what Grigori wanted to buy, or who he wanted to buy it of. But whatever it was, his master would not listen to the proposal; he needed a good cook, and Grigori was a marvel! To add to the romance of the whole story, I gathered that soon after Grigori returned to the

country, a big dinner was offered to the neighbours, to give them a taste of the quality of the Moscow "chef," and it appeared that the renowned cook tried to poison the guests. The dinner was excellent, but every one was taken ill directly after the meal was over. Grigori was whipped in the stables, and then he begged to be forgiven. All this had happened years ago, it seemed. Now-a-days Grigori is very much beloved by every one; though some, who are in authority, seem not to be entirely at ease in his presence. My mother is very attached to him, and he seems always particularly cordial in his manner towards her. The story goes that he was threatened with Siberia, and that mamma begged that the sentence should be remitted.

One day I overheard long stories about Grigori, which Arina was telling in strict confidence to our nurse. But just at the most interesting point, when they were talking about Grigori's wife, and Arina was whispering something into my old nurse's ear, they noticed I was listening.

"Run along and play! You are always sticking your nose in where you are not

wanted !” cried Niania, with pretended severity.

There were two places that were considered by the authorities as being particularly unsuitable resorts for us children—the stables and the kitchen. It was thought we might learn improper things in either of these haunts. Even Peter was forbidden the kitchen, for fear of his eating something which might be bad for his health. It was very difficult to sneak in on the quiet, for Grigori was merciless in his manner of treating us. He would just glance at us with his downcast eyes ; frown and glower under his bushy eyebrows, and pronounce in his guttural voice the words, “ Be off !” and there was nothing more to be said. Occasionally I could soften for a few moments his mood, and he would give me a taste of something good—a black pan-cake made of rye, or an onion filled with coarse salt ; but directly I had eaten it, he would say : “ Now then, be off with you !”

One day we had been hunting long and vainly for the Angora rabbits. They were curious, rare, blue-grey or white animals, who lived at the back of the coach-house. They

were kept, it seemed, for the sake of their long fur, which was used in the making of shawls and other warm garments. In vain had we stood throwing leaves and other green meat into the enclosure where they were kept ; we could see no trace of a little grey body. At last Peter suggested they must be in the kitchen. Forthwith we arranged a most feasible plan for penetrating into that sanctum ; for Grigori, at this hour of the afternoon, was generally asleep ; and if by any chance he should happen to be in the kitchen, I was deputed to act as spokesman.

After taking a thousand minute precautions, we found ourselves in front of the sacred edifice, which was overlooked by the windows of mamma's room ; then we scraped our small bodies along the wall, or crept along the ground, which was wet with greasy kitchen water, where spread the roots of huge-leaved burdocks and stinging nettles ; we covered ourselves with filth, and occasionally hurt a hand or a knee against a dry skull or bone. Never mind. We crawled on, and in another minute we were on the step, and were passing through the passage way, which was filled with tables and benches. I pushed open a swing baize-covered door, and a puff of

hot air, laden with a sickly smell, like vapour rising from the nether regions, greeted our nostrils. We paused on the threshold. Grigori was standing in the middle of the kitchen, his back turned to us. At the table under the holy images were seated three strangers dressed in black, who ate with slow rhythmic gestures, as if performing some sacred rite. A yellow wooden bowl stood before them on the table. They were "wanderers" returning from some long pilgrimage; they had arrived in the morning and asked for alms.

Without a moment's consideration I jump at Grigori, and throw my arms round his neck.

"Dear Grigori, we want to see the rabbits!"

Grigori seems quite strange to-day, and as if he did not see us, or realize who we are. Without answering, he opens a door, and pushes us all into a little room opening off the kitchen, and shuts the door upon us. In this room two women are sitting, and each one has a rabbit on her lap. With quick, rhythmic, but decided movements, they each of them pull handfuls of fur from the unfortunate animals; which fur they pile up on the little heaps of silky pale

grey wool that lie on white sheets on the floor. Two or three miserable rabbits, already stripped to their pink bare skins, are huddled up, one against the other, in a corner, with eyes wide open and staring with fright. The half-stripped bodies of those still undergoing the horrible operation, struggle and writhe on the women's laps; but their struggles are of no avail; handful after handful of the silky grey wool is pitilessly thrown with regular, remorseless movement on the downy heaps. A cold shiver runs down my back, a sob rises in my throat, and I feel as if I should choke.

I cry out: "You are hurting them! You are hurting them!"

The women only laugh; and Peter is as stupid and as heartless as they are.

"It doesn't hurt them a bit; and they would be ill if their fur were not pulled out at this time of year," he replies sapiently.

I don't know enough about the matter to contradict him on these grounds; but I feel revolted and disgusted, and I cannot watch the horrible scene. I go back into the kitchen with the intention of returning to the garden. As I open the kitchen door a monotonous voice, like

a dull vibrating violin string, strikes my ears ; the voice is saying—

“Because the Tempter sent him a false vision, the gentleman went at midnight to the cemetery ; and what did he see there? Why, he saw every one of the serfs who had died that year. They stood there in white shirts, whiter than the raiment of God’s angels ; and the oldest of the serfs said to him : ‘ Don’t go into the belfry, sir.’ But the gentleman, who wished so much to find the treasure, which his grandfather in Pougatcheff’s time had hidden away, did not listen to the old peasant. He went up the steps of the belfry, and caught hold of the bell rope that rings the bell, as the voice in the vision had told him to do. He tried to pull it—but it was not a bell rope at all. It was His tail!”

“May the holy cross protect us !” exclaimed Féodote, one of the kitchen helps, who sat with the other kitchen serfs on benches along the side of the wall.

“And since then he has been quite mad,” continued the woman, without a change of intonation in her voice. “And his mother takes him about to all the most holy of the

shrines ; but the good Lord does not restore his reason."

Silence fell on the assembly. The flies buzzed. A cricket behind the huge stove began to chirp. I held my breath, for I did not want to be seen.

"There are some of the nobility, however, who fear God," one of the listeners ventured timidly to suggest.

"Who fear God?" replied Grigori mockingly. "Do you imagine then that they believe in God? I know something about them, I can tell you! I have seen at Moscow lords, and princes, and counts. Have you ever seen them making the sign of the cross? Does an orthodox sign himself in the way they do? They make the sign just as if they were playing the guitar."

Then, stepping into the middle of the kitchen, and putting on a casual, indifferent expression, Grigori, with his right hand, made a vague gesture in the region of his stomach. The audience laughed, and I quite recognized that the gesture made by Grigori was extremely like that made by my uncle when he rose from table. Grigori, proud of his success, now

opened a little cupboard, and took out a bottle full of a dark yellow liquid, with which he filled a small glass, and offered it to the eldest of the three wanderers.

Then each of the audience in turn told comic stories about my uncles in Moscow, and how they were up to their ears in debt ; these were followed by anecdotes about the neighbouring landowners, some of whom, though far from rich, lived in grand style, and kept actors of their own, just like " real lords."

The woman who had made such a success with her mystic tale of the false vision, here interrupted. Her cheeks glowed, her eyes flashed, as she remarked with fervour : " It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

At this moment, the boys, who had evidently had enough of the plucking of the rabbits, rushed noisily into the kitchen. The audience rose respectfully to their feet. Grigori Nikowitch, who appeared in excellent humour, suggested an amusing game ; he stood at the door, and, swelling out his chest, shouted in a loud and important tone—

“The carriage of Monsieur Nicolas stops the way!”

My brother came forward; Grigori offered him the support of his arm, in the same way as the menservants were accustomed to help grandmamma into the carriage, and led him to the flight of steps in front of the kitchen, after which he returned, and went through the same performance with Peter. Then I heard the cry: “The carriage of Mademoiselle Alexandra stops the way;” and I stepped forward, and innocently allowed myself to be conducted with due pomp to the flight of steps. On our arrival there, I received a resounding smack on that part of the body which is below the back, and the kitchen door was slammed behind me.

I find Peter trembling with rage in the courtyard, and threatening to go and complain forthwith to grandmamma. I try and prove to him that this line of action is out of the question, as it was only yesterday I had promised not to do any of the forbidden things; and if we go to grandmamma, we shall have to own that we have all been in the kitchen. Peter won't listen to what I have to say; therefore, as arguments seem to have no effect, I hit him full in the face with

my fist, and we have a regular stand-up fight. Peter is beaten as usual, and he promises not to go and tell, but proposes we should retire into the coach-house. I, however, am in that frame of mind when not even the coach-house has attractions. I am tired, disgusted, and in the worst temper possible. I leave the rest of the children, and go and hide my mortification in the garden. There, stretched full length under a flowering cherry-tree, I cry long and bitterly. I cry because my feelings have been wounded and humiliated, and because I hate Grigori—because the rabbits have been plucked—because God would not restore the reason of the poor gentleman whom the devil had deceived.

The noonday heat strikes straight down on the quivering earth. Except for the cry of the insolent crickets there is dead silence all around me. Now and then a bird hops from one twig to another ; and the kindly cherry tree drops, from time to time, a delicate white petal on my burning forehead, and on my dress, soiled with the filth in which flourish the great coarse burdocks, and the rank nettles at the kitchen door.

A DAY OF TRAGEDY

V

A DAY OF TRAGEDY

Boys are always unbearable !

Peter has an army ; a real army with living soldiers. He commands at least twenty soldiers, the children of the various servants ; and if he wants more, four or five more boys are fetched from the village. Every morning, just when Mademoiselle Renault is giving me my lessons, he drills his soldiers on the shady side of the house, in the big courtyard, which is covered with a scanty growth of grass. Peter's soldiers have real wooden guns that grandmamma has had made for them by Elisar the blacksmith ; and they have caps that Dounia and Arishka have sewn ; in a word, they are just like real soldiers. My brother is the officer, and Peter is the general. I don't mind about not having a command in the army, but I do think they might wait till I had finished my lessons, so that I could watch their drill and their

manœuvring. But they won't listen to me. They say first, that girls are never soldiers; and secondly, that grandmamma has forbidden them playing at soldiers when it is very hot. Now, mamma does not allow me to do lessons during the hot time of the day; Mademoiselle Renault supports her in this decision, declaring that in the general way I do scarcely anything in the morning, and that in the afternoon she cannot make me read, even a line. What does she know about the matter? Did I not manage to get hold of a book she had very carefully hidden; and did I not read by myself in the garden a whole page of it? It is true, it was a very stupid book; and I could not understand what it was about; so I left it in the grass, near the hedge, just where I had sat down to read it.

One morning, during breakfast, grandmamma told us to be quiet a moment, and then listened attentively. In the distance, quite in the distance, we could distinguish the familiar sound of a troika bell. "Who could be coming at this time of the day?" the grown-ups asked one another. The sound drew nearer; the bell was now clanging noisily. Then suddenly the sound

ceased—the travellers must have arrived at the entry of the village, at one of the large gates which close the two extremities of the hamlet, in order to keep in the cattle after they have been driven down from the pastures. Once again the bell started clanging; the sound increased, became distinct and clear. We could now hear the tinkle of the little harness bells, and the trot of the horses. They were now in the avenue leading up to the house.

We run out on the doorstep, and watch the carriage being driven up at full speed. Grand-mamma, mamma, all the servants—every one is on the doorstep. The coachman, Tarass, scrutinizes with a professional glance the carriage and horses.

The arrivals are our neighbours, the Lovoffs, who live fifteen versts away. They all get out of the carriage; there are two young girls, older than I am, and two boys. They have come early, so as to escape the heat, and they intend to spend the day with us. What luck! There will be no lessons! I shall surely be able to play at soldiers with Peter and his army! We all sit down to table. The new-comers are hungry, and they go on eating for a long time.

Mademoiselle Renault places me between Sophie and Agnes, and tells me to behave nicely. So, in order to carry out her wishes, I take the opportunity of saying: "Do you know, Peter has some real soldiers; we shall be able to play at soldiers with him; I shan't have any lessons to-day." The two young girls glance at me indifferently, and carefully arrange their embroidered cuffs. I must confess, I expected more enthusiasm.

"We also have soldiers," said Jean, the elder of the two boys.

I explain to him that Peter has *real* soldiers, living soldiers, with *real* guns. The two boys, more intelligent than the girls, begin to show interest in what I am saying, and ask questions. I explain; Peter interferes, declares that I know nothing about it, and gives information from his point of view.

The two little girls listen to us, glance at one another, and begin to laugh. I guess that they are laughing at me, and I promise myself to be even with them later on, in the courtyard or in the garden; for it is impossible to speak here seriously before the grown-ups, who know nothing, and care less, about our affairs. Peter,

who by this time is very excited, for he has just learnt that the soldiers belonging to the two boy visitors are made of wood, orders the servants to muster the whole army in the courtyard ; then, turning to my brother, he gives him the command to prepare the army for a review. The four boys, looking full of importance, leave the table and go outside. I want to follow them, but the two little girls have not yet finished their tea, and Mademoiselle Renault, shaking her curls, remarks in the suave, gentle voice which she always puts on when she gives an order that she means shall be obeyed : " Sasha, your friends have not yet finished their breakfast." I understand her only too well, and I rage inwardly ; but I remark quite politely to my two " friends " : " Couldn't you hurry a little ? " Once more they laugh, and Mademoiselle Renault darts a severe glance in my direction. At last they have finished, and I hurry them out. " It is in the courtyard that they are playing ! Come along, quickly ! " They follow me, but again glance at each other, and smile superciliously.

By this time, the review going on in the courtyard is at its height.

The general is giving orders, the barefooted soldiers, in their coarse linen blue or white tunics, are marching backwards and forwards, and handling their guns in masterly style. This is of no great interest to me.

One small soldier lets his gun drop. Peter runs up to him, and boxes his ears; the little fellow cries.

Living, as I did, amongst boys, I was completely permeated with masculine morality; and to hit any one smaller and weaker than oneself was a cowardly action, in my eyes. I told Peter what I thought of him. In the general way, observations of this sort were permitted amongst ourselves, but this time, Peter, exasperated by the presence of other boys, turned his back on me with the remark: "Officers always beat their soldiers. You don't know anything about it; you are only a girl, and I—I am a general!"

Then, in order to prove his supreme contempt for my opinion, he began once more to knock the unfortunate little fellow about.

Quite beside myself, I rushed forward, and tried to defend the culprit; then, with the view of taking efficacious action, I seized the wooden

gun which the small soldier, who was now stretched on the ground, had let fall.

I had noticed that the two girls, who were standing by, interested spectators of this scene, were once more laughing. If Peter had to defend his honour before his boy friends, I had to defend mine before them all. The two girls, and their brothers, were evidently amusing themselves at my expense ; and Peter's twenty soldiers were watching me with sympathy and astonishment, not unmingled with doubt. I swung the gun round my head, and dared Peter to come a step nearer his victim, who was now crying heartbrokenly. My hands and feet felt stone cold ; a new, but cruelly pleasant feeling had taken possession of my whole being. It was a furious desire to make Peter suffer, an aching longing to injure this being who stood before me. I wished to see the red blood running down his flushed, hostile, and, as it seemed to me, strange face. I had all the difficulty in the world to remain on the defensive, though I wished that the first blow should be struck by the enemy ; for in spite of the violence of my avenging ardour, there lay in the depths of my heart a residuum of original sin. I wanted

badly to fight, but I wanted, at the same time, to have a good reason for fighting. I longed to conquer my enemy, but to be able to pose as the one attacked, and who had to defend herself.

There is no doubt that at this moment there was something strange in my look, for the little girls no longer laughed, and the boys glanced at one another anxiously. Peter knew me too well to attack me. In order, therefore, to escape certain defeat, he entered on the tortuous paths of diplomacy—

“That is not the way to play at soldiers,” he said. “I am a general; and you, what are you? You have nothing to do with it, and yet you want to interfere.”

I was worked up to a state of excited exaltation; I spoke without thinking, and acted without reflecting. I was in that state when one utters words of rank folly, and commits actions which too often give the whole situation away.

“I—I am an empress!” I shouted.

And as I spoke, I felt that I was indeed an empress; I felt the weight on my head of a small crown; I could see my ermine mantle,

and the sceptre in my hand, exactly as I remembered them in the portraits of the Empress Catherine which hung in the drawing-room.

This remark gave Jean a chance of intervening in the dispute.

After a moment's pause, he declared that we had never agreed to have an empress in the game, and no one wanted an empress. He was right on this point, but I would not listen to him. I was still whirling my sceptre round my head, but I was no longer the champion of a noble cause. I was a usurper, fighting without any real conviction against subjects in revolt. The struggle now was short; the four boys fell upon me, disarmed me, hit me, and declared that they would not play with me any more.

I was obliged to submit. With all the dignity that I could summon to my aid, I declared that I would no longer play with *them*, especially at such a stupid game. Then, proudly, I turned my back on them, and went into exile, abandoning without regret my crown and my sceptre.

I walked towards the two girls, who had left the fatal field of battle, and whose light

summer dresses I could see in the distance among the trees of the park.

I was received with extreme chilliness by the representatives of my own sex. They looked so fresh and dainty, these two young persons without royal pretensions, in their light blue muslin dresses, and the embroidered flounces to their drawers which came down to their knees, and showed below their short petticoats. White embroidered collars covered their necks, and dainty embroidered cuffs adorned their thin and angular arms. I, the fallen queen, had been this morning dressed as carefully as they were, but now my dress was stained with green, and told the sad tale of more than one humiliating fall on the grass, under the blows of the revolutionaries; where the gathers of my skirt were torn from the bodice, there showed at the back a gaping hole; one of my white cuffs was slit open, like a fish that had been prepared for frying. When the two neatly-dressed young persons caught sight of me they once more began to laugh; then, hiding their mocking smiles, they asked me if we had a swing.

Of course we had one, and a "giant's stride"

also. But they decided to go to the swing, though swinging was an amusement I hated. As soon as we reached the swing, I was hoisted up by the two girls, and seated, before I knew where I was, on the long board which hung by four ropes ; the two girls jumped up, one on either end of the board, and before I had time to utter a word of protest, the swing was flying through the air, creaking and lurching horribly, whilst my heart rose into my throat each time the rhythmic swaying carried me first aloft, and then down into the depths. I clung convulsively to the board. The surrounding foliage, agitated by an invisible force, enveloped me in waves of greenish mist—impalpable, and yet suffocating ; the rising torture of giddiness seized my brain, and crushed it as if with pincers, whose gripping teeth were covered with wadding. I was swinging in a floating nightmare ; and, as is the case in a nightmare, I found a difficulty in making my voice heard. At last I shouted in real agony—

“ Let me get down ! ”

“ She is frightened,” said one of the little girls to the other. Then they laughed again, and the swing flew higher and higher. Rage,

which I, however, tried to conceal, gave me fresh force, and again I shouted—

“ Let me get down, or I will jump ! ”

Another burst of laughter, but no reply. I was no longer giddy, but felt horribly sick ; and was so exhausted, so weakened, that I had not even the strength to carry out my threat of jumping. My torturers were not slow in perceiving this, and each time they worked the swing backwards and forwards, they cried out—

“ Jump ! Jump ! Jump ! ”

At last they either grew tired of their sport, or they were alarmed at the appearance of my blanched, wretched face. They allowed the swing to stop gradually ; I jumped hastily to the ground, and then, like a queen going into exile, after a double degradation and insult, I walked straight away, without even a declaration of a rupture of diplomatic relations. Once more I had been humiliated. Where, O ! where should I fly ?

The sun beat down like a mist of white fire, and the weary earth, deprived of all moisture, incapable of offering any further resistance to the fervent sun rays, sent up towards the heavens a reek of vibrating, cruel, and perfumed

heat. Not a leaf stirred. The tall grass, over which waved a layer of golden buttercups, looked in the distance like a portion of the sun's surface which had fallen to the ground. Butterflies, like flashing sparks, hovered over the grass. The sun's rays penetrated everywhere, and even under the trees there seemed scarcely any shade. The noontide glow was merged in heat, and the heat was merged in noontide glow.

I was suffering acutely; every moment I seemed to feel more and more the weariness of the earth. The dry, overheated, and surcharged air had become difficult to breathe; the blinding light, suffusing everything, inspired a vague terror. Where could I hide myself?

Aimlessly I dragged myself along—without thought or desire. Once more I stood in the courtyard, now quite deserted, and straight in front of me I saw the huge doors of the coach-house standing open. The sight of these doors gave me fresh courage and energy. The next moment I had run across the yard, and had taken refuge in the great, square, windowless building.

Immediately a delightful coolness seemed to enfold me. The darkness was at first so intense, that I could not distinguish one object from another. Little by little I began, through the gloom, to make out the outline of the carriages, with their shafts sticking up in the air like warning arms; their wheels motionless, their hoods up. How enormous the carriages were as they stood in the coach-house! With extreme care I walked round each of them, till I reached grandmamma's coach, which is only used to take her to church; I climbed up into it. It was like climbing up a mountain. The cushions were soft, and I stretched myself on them with a pleasant sensation of extreme comfort. The raised hood formed a cave in the midst of a marvellous country, where, in a grey half-light, I could trace the silhouettes of the dark carriages of various forms, looking like huge petrified birds. Here and there a ray of sun filtered through the cracks between the rounded tree trunks of which the coach-house was built, and struck through the gloom like a long streak of pale gold. Thousands and thousands of little objects, so small that they were almost invisible,

swayed, hovered and danced backwards and forwards in these long, long golden rays. What a nice smell the leather, the ropes and the tar had in this vast, gloomy, cool and calm palace, where these tiny, tiny objects danced in the pale golden rays. They were perhaps little girls like myself, but much happier, because no one laughed at them, and because they lived in such a pleasant, cool and calm home.

Soothed and comforted by the coolness, the darkness, and the ceaseless dance of the little objects, I fall asleep. A long way off, a voice seems to strike on my ears. It is that of a child, crying. Then I distinguish a man's voice speaking. That voice also I seem to know, though I am still dreaming. I am the empress; I wear a magnificent yellow robe; I have a long, long golden sceptre, and tiny dolls, no bigger than flies, dance round my sceptre. I am driving in grandmamma's coach, drawn by our three white horses, but they seem to be much whiter than usual. The great square, where stands Minine and Pojarsky's monument, is full of soldiers, who are being drilled. Every one shouts "Hurrah!" There is Peter,

who is the general ; he kneels before me, and begs my pardon for having struck the little boy ; he promises me never again to strike little boys smaller than himself. I grant him my forgiveness, but a big black giant, whose voice resembles strangely that of Tarass, the coachman, cries out—

“Curse them all !”

Then again I hear the sound of tears ; it is a little boy crying.

“Don’t cry, Mischka ! If he strikes you again, you shall see. Don’t cry ! Where does it hurt you ?”

Surely it is Tarass himself speaking. I am lying stretched at full length on one of the seats of grandmamma’s carriage. All around is darkness. I am in the coach-house—and Mischka is crying—sobbing as children sob who are tired out with crying.

I jump out of the carriage. I always make the same mistake of trying to escape, when the right thing to do, if I do not want to be taken in the act, is to lie low and wait.

“Who is there ?” says Tarass, in such a terrible voice that I begin to tremble.

What is going to happen to me ?

As usual, I resolve to meet openly the danger, which has now become inevitable.

“ Tarass ! It is I ; *I* did not beat Mischka ! ”

As no answer comes, I run swiftly from the palace of gloom, and return to the kingdom of resplendent sunlight.

TO RENÉ GHIL

RAIN

VI

RAIN

THAT year the heat and drought during dog-days were terrible. Not the least drop of rain fell, not the slightest breeze brought temporary relief. Every day, during every meal, at every moment of the day, when the "grown-ups" were together, they talked of nothing but the drought, and the chances of rain.

We children also were very preoccupied with wondering whether rain was coming soon. In the morning, when we went out, we searched carefully the four corners of the horizon, and if the tiniest white cloud made its appearance against the spotless azure of the sky, we rushed in joyfully to announce that rain was coming. Alas! We were again and again doomed to disappointment. The white diaphanous messenger faded into the background of blue, and

the persistent sun poured down its scorching rays, ceaselessly and mercilessly.

It was so hot in the afternoons that I had not even the courage to go out, but wandered restlessly up and down the house. Sometimes I lingered in the embroidery room, and watched the nimble needles pricking backwards and forwards in the tightly-stretched linen or silk; whilst delicate fingers caught deftly the tiny point as it appeared and re-appeared. Even there the only talk was of the longed-for rain. If a drought like this continued there would, they say, be no bread. What trouble that will bring; for how will they manage at all to live? Things are no longer as they were in the time of the old lord, who was both rich and kind. Now his scamps of sons never give a passing thought to the condition of the peasants. All they want is money, and more money, to pay for the rackety lives they are living in Moscow. Madame's barns are empty; all the corn goes straight off to Moscow; and she herself does not trouble her head about the peasants. She is just like her sons, and has no real care either for the peasants or for the house servants. She does not trouble much even about her own grandchildren, with the exception

of that good-for-nothing boy, Peter. She does not care for the others any more than she cares for her dogs.

And the heads are raised from the embroidery frames, the needles cease pricking, and the eyes, weary with the suffocating heat, light up once more with human interest. What they say is only too true ; grandmamma does not care for me at all : she has eyes only for Peter ; but why, I can't help wondering, does that make him "good-for-nothing" ? I feel a longing to ask why, because there is no rain, there will be no bread ; and why Peter is a good-for-nothing ? but a figure, like that of a little girl grown very old, glides into the room, and I am unable for the time to satisfy my curiosity. Her snow-white hair is carefully combed down on either side of her temples, and a smile hovers round her closed lips. As soon as she makes her appearance the needles begin once more to appear and disappear in the tightly-stretched tissues ; the heads are once more bowed over the embroidery frames, and the faces, that a moment ago looked flushed, seem to me now quite white.

The "little girl who has grown old" is

grandmamma's dwarf. She was brought here a long, long time ago ; long before I was born, from some very distant village which belonged to grandmamma. It seems that none of the young men of the village would marry her, so she was made grandmamma's dwarf. She occupies a little room by herself at the top of the house. I often go up there when I want to hide in a place where I am quite sure that no one will be able to find me ; for no one else, except my niania, Pélagia Mikhailovna, ever goes up there. She, however, sometimes takes tea with the dwarf. Every one calls her dwarf, and I feel quite certain it is her real name ; but the embroideresses call her "Anna Ivanovna." The dwarf looks after them as they sit at work ; and if they are idle, she complains to grandmamma.

She is not exactly disliked, but I seem to understand there are certain things that must not be said in her presence. One day, when I was in her room, I told her with real delight how Alexander the manservant had kissed Dounia, the fair embroidery girl, in one of the passages. Alexander was a very bad man who made fun of every one ; and I thought it was

very kind of him to kiss Dounia, who was crying at the time. But the fact of my telling about it seems to have made a lot of mischief! Grand-mamma was very angry with Mademoiselle Renault; mamma cried; Dounia declared that I had told a lie. I could not understand what it all meant; and finally I grew convinced that Alexander had *not* kissed Dounia, and I said so. As a result I was shut up all one afternoon in the school-room, and I had to learn three lines of a fable about a liar, a bridge, and a lot of other things, which I can't remember now. But the most serious part of the whole business to me was that my niania was so angry with me that she would not bring me in bed the cakes and sweeties of which, as a punishment, I had been deprived; and that as she was putting me to bed she said "God punishes liars."

The dwarf makes the round of the embroidery frames, and then goes out. I follow her. She is on the way up to her tiny little room: that adorable spot! It is a room such as every little girl ought to have for her very own.

Its furniture consisted of a tiny, low bed, covered with a patchwork quilt of variegated colours; a little chair and table to match, a sort

of doll's chest of drawers, and a spinning wheel. In the corner were the icons, a small oil lamp burning in front of them ; and below the lamp hung an easter egg, suspended by a dark blue ribbon. The only window of the room looked on to the roof, and the ceiling was so low that I could touch it when standing on the great chest in the corner.

Ah ! That great chest ! What memories it recalls.

As soon as Dwarf reaches her room she seats herself at the spinning wheel, while I stand by her side watching the fine yellow thread as it winds on the swiftly-turning wheel. I am still under the impression of the conversation I had overheard in the embroidery room, and I ask why, in my grandfather's time, there was always bread although there might be no rain ? Dwarf replies that without rain there never can be bread.

For a time the spinning goes on in silence ; then, as always happens when she is in a good humour, she begins to tell me stories about my grandfather, and what a good and rich man he was, and how kind to all his serfs. Then she drifts into the story of her own life, and tells me

how happy she was when my grandmother was young. As grandmamma's dwarf she was seated all day on a velvet cushion in the drawing-room, was dressed in magnificent costumes, and her only occupation was to sing Madame's favourite songs. This part of the story (for to me it was a real fairy tale) I awaited always with extreme impatience, because I was then able to ask her to show me the costumes she used to wear. She would open the magic chest, and would display, with all due pomp, in the light of day, the dresses she wore when grandmamma was young. Among those that pleased me most were a pink silk dress, with a bunched overskirt, and a white powdered wig. This wig was a final touch, which never ceased to astonish me. There was also a shepherdess's costume, and a superb dress with a long train; besides many more than I can now remember. I asked her why she no longer wore those lovely things; and she replied that it was because she was old now, and that everything had changed. Then in her soft little monotonous voice she would tell me about the entertainments of bygone days, of the great personages, who were now dead, and of the family wealth,

which had since disappeared. I listened to all this part of her story without really understanding; and as I stood at the window I watched the sparrows quarrelling on the grey roof, and the swallows skimming through the warm summer air, uttering little shrill cries. And still "the little girl who had grown old" chattered softly on, as she smoothed with a tiny caressing hand the old silk petticoats, and the faded but treasured glories of bygone days.

How I longed to live like Dwarf! To have, like her, a little room of my own, a china egg, and a pink silk costume.

I could not refrain from uttering my thought aloud.

"I should like to be just like you, Dwarf."

"Don't say that, mademoiselle. I am only a poor cripple, and you will be a beautiful young lady."

"But you have just told me that every one used to look at you, and that you were beautiful. I want also to have a pink silk dress, and to be beautiful."

"You will have lovely dresses, and you will be beautiful, when some day you marry a fine young gentleman."

This was a matter which I had not yet taken into consideration. What did this word "marriage" mean, of which the "grown-ups" were always talking? I constantly heard the remark "He, or she, is going to be married."

"And you, Dwarf, were you never married?"

"No, your grandmamma wished to marry me to a male dwarf, who belonged to a gentleman living on another estate; but your grandfather, in his wisdom, would not allow it. He said it was not right to make a sport of human beings."

After this explanation, I understood less than ever what marriage was. Neither can I explain by what mechanism of thought, or of feeling, I understood that, in this question of marriage, there was a mystery, and, as it seemed to me, a disagreeable mystery. Just as happens in a dream, when everything seems to flash through one's mind at the same time, hundreds of remarks made by grown-up people at different times about marriage flooded my memory. The whole array of remarks seemed to me either of an unpleasantly jocular nature, or bearing a double meaning, or entirely in-

comprehensible ; and I exclaimed petulantly :
“ Then I won’t be married, either ! ”

I had grown suddenly sad. The dwarf returned to her spinning wheel. The heat grew more and more oppressive. The sparrows had left the roof. The swallows darted with almost nervous haste through the hot air. A strange silence seemed to weigh on everything. Then a cock crew. The spinning wheel turned with a soft, whirring sound ; the flies buzzed near our heads, and settled on our lips ; when driven away, they seemed to return with angry persistence. The little woman looked, as she sat at her wheel, like a large mechanical doll, so impassive was her wrinkled face, and so fixed was the smile on her close shut lips.

Then the thought came over me with a rush : I had seen all this exactly as I saw it now—before ! The big mechanical doll, the spinning wheel, turning, turning ; the quaint old silk dresses with the hanging lace sleeves, giving them an almost appealing look ; the crushed pink skirt with its two bunchy, quite ridiculous paniers. Yes, I had seen them before, hanging half out of the open chest. But where had I seen them ? A feeling of terror, of oppressive,

threatening terror, took possession of me. I could scarcely breathe. For a moment some strange light, quite different from the light of day, flooded the little room. Then a muffled growl like thunder sounded in the distance.

“Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!” exclaimed the dwarf, crossing herself. “Come down-stairs quickly, the storm is coming; it is going to rain!”

The whole house seemed pervaded with unusual noise and movement; servants ran about, closing windows, pulling down blinds, and banging noisily the outside shutters. Arina, “the viper,” with a taper in her hand, was lighting the little lamps in front of the icons in the down-stairs rooms. I trotted after the dwarf, following her every movement. She made straight for the front door, but Mademoiselle Renault was watching me, and forbade me to go out. Grandmamma, she said, had given an order that the children were not to leave the house. That might be so: but there were other ways of leaving the house than by the front door. As there were no shutters to

the windows of the hall, I stood with nose flattened against the window panes, and reflected, whilst I watched what was going on outside.

The courtyard was bathed in sunshine, and in the middle stood a group of peasants and servants, watching the sky, gesticulating, and discussing feverishly the signs of the weather. When Dwarf made her appearance, every one turned to her.

“She understands all about it, does Dwarf,” exclaimed a young page boy. “She knows whether the storm is going to bring rain, or nothing but hail.”

I felt I must get out, cost what it might.

Just then my aunt crossed the hall, looking almost distraught; as she caught sight of Mademoiselle Renault she exclaimed—

“Have you any sal volatile? Mamma is ill; she is so frightened at the storm.”

Mademoiselle Renault turns to go up-stairs; the women servants scatter in every direction. A reddish light quivers through the air. Every one stops and makes the sign of the cross; and on all sides one hears: “Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God of Sabaoth!”

The little page and I make the sign of the cross at the same moment ; and we both repeat :
“ Holy ! Holy ! Holy ! ”

I must get out, cost what it may.

The terrace ! That is the way by which I must go. I run through the drawing-room and dining-room. Except for the tiny lamps in front of the icons, the rooms are in total darkness. I catch murmured appeals, which seem to come from a distance. The door on to the terrace is locked, the shutters are closed. The distant thunder rumbles and threatens. I mutter hurriedly : “ Holy ! Holy ! Holy ! ” over and over again, for a feeling of intense anguish takes possession of me. Some terrible danger is pressing on us ; and it appears to me that the exact point which is threatened is the house, which has been closed in self-defence. I am torn between an instinct which bids me fly from the dark and doomed house, and a painful curiosity which torments me to the point of torture ; at any cost I must witness this danger, but at the same time I have a mortal fear of seeing it.

I run back into the hall ; there is no one ! Once more I cross the threshold, and mix with

a group of people who are anxiously watching the sky.

The sun still shines brilliantly and pitilessly ; there is not a breath of air, not a sound of any bird ; nothing but the weak plaintive little cry of the swallows, as they fly close to the ground. Every one is watching a steel-grey mass, which seems to cover half the sky. It moves slowly forward towards the sun ; it covers pitilessly all the white rounded clouds, which seem to be trying to escape from the terrible darkness that must assuredly reign behind this curtain of inky blackness. The little clouds can be seen on the edges of this massive moving danger—the storm.

I was quite aware that the thunder was the noise made by the chariot of the prophet Elias, when he drives forth among the clouds. I also understood that the flashes and sparks of light from his horses' hoofs was the lightning which kills the wicked ; but what I could not believe was that a saint should wish to burn and destroy the trees and the houses of good people ; or to kill unoffending animals like cows and horses.

But this moment of danger gave me clear

vision and understanding of everything : Elias, in order to bring rain and give us bread, was forced to make war against the wicked sun, which, by causing a drought, took the bread out of the mouths of the poor people. It is in order to fight this battle with the sun that Elias leaves Paradise, and drives about in the sky ; while the flashes of lightning are the darts with which he strikes the sun, and forces him to grant rain. Yes, that must be how it all comes about.

“ There will be hail,” says Tarass, the coachman. “ It’s all up with us ! ”

The rest are silent, and watch the dwarf, who with eyes raised towards the threatening iron-grey mass of clouds, stands motionless, and also silent.

Suddenly a blast of wind, which appears to come from some far distant region, raises and drives before it a cloud of dust. The white cloudlets in the sky seem to rush forward and cover the face of the sun, as if to protect it from the threatening black mass, which now hangs low above our heads. Zigzags of lightning furrow and tear open the surface of this black mass.

“No,” says the dwarf; “there will be no hail!”

The bystanders shake their heads incredulously, but nevertheless reassured. Another mass of reddish grey now makes its appearance from the opposite side, behind the house. The feeble little white clouds, which were doing their best to defend the sun, are now completely swallowed up. Big, splashing drops of rain, few and far between, begin slowly to fall. A flash of lightning, followed immediately by a deafening thunderclap, lights up the scene with a lurid red glow, and the rain pours down as if a reservoir had been suddenly opened.

We all whisper “Holy! Holy! Holy!” and run off in every direction to seek shelter.

Full of various emotions, and with my clothes not as dry as they might have been, I once more followed the dwarf into the house. My intention was to return to her room, and there to question her more fully about the prophet Elias and his actions; for she was the one, it seemed to me, who knew most about him. But “the viper” called the dwarf, and told her to go to grandmamma, who wished to have her opinion about the probabilities of hail

coming later on. So I turned into our own room, where Pélagia Mikhailovna was looking after my brothers. Peter was shut up with grandmamma in her room ; for she was more frightened than ever when Peter was not near her. Pélagia Mikhailovna explained the situation to me in a tone that conveyed displeasure ; and she added, as if speaking to herself : " She had better fear God's anger." I took this remark to mean that Pélagia Mikhailovna had the same ideas as I had about the storm, and I related to her my discovery about Elias and the sun ; but I soon found she was listening to me in the same way as I had the habit of listening—without hearing a single word. I therefore came to the conclusion that she, like me, was preoccupied with serious matters, and I went and looked out of the window.

Evidently Elias had scored this time a remarkable victory ! The whole world seemed plunged in a mist of rain, which fell, and fell, and washed and soaked everything. I could scarcely distinguish the tops of the nearest trees, as they bent and swayed with the wind. But Elias, furious with the long resistance the sun had offered him, was still darting his white

and red arrows from every corner of the compass ; whilst the rolling of his chariot sounded from one end of the sky to the other. And the struggle was so furious and so terrible, and I was so preoccupied with following the rolling of the chariot, and with speculating about the precise spot in the heavens where the prophet might be at a given moment, that I had no time to feel the slightest fear.

The rain fell all day, and all the evening. We were at last put to bed, but I woke up several times during the night. The thunder was still muttering in the distance, and some one was talking in the room. Pélagia Mikhailovna was speaking to the dwarf, and to Dounia, who had both taken refuge in our bedroom.

“ Holy ! Holy ! Holy ! ” murmured the three women, crossing themselves.

“ Why is it so light, Niania ? ”

“ It is the lightning,” replied Pélagia Mikhailovna. “ Go to sleep ! ”

“ It is a ‘ Sparrows’ night,’ ” said Dounia, in a low, frightened voice.¹

¹ In the dialect of our province a “ Sparrows’ night ” meant a night when distant summer lightning is so frequent and continuous that there is scarcely any darkness.

“How can it be a ‘Sparrows’ night’ when Elias is making war?” I thought to myself. “It must be because the sparrows are such fighters,” I replied to my own thought. “Yes, that is it.” And I went off to sleep again.

'WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY'

VII

‘WHEN THE CAT’S AWAY’

I WAS sitting in the school-room near one of the open windows, my elbows on the table, and a book before me. I was in punishment, and condemned for the day to live in an atmosphere of spilt ink, of mustiness, and of oil paint. Listlessly I watched a busy swallow, as it flashed backwards and forwards to its nest under the eaves.

A sad, silent melancholy seemed to haunt this grey, empty room, with its two ink-stained tables, its curtainless windows, its low yellowish ceiling, against which imprisoned flies buzzed despairingly, and sought in vain for liberty. And I repeated monotonously: “Maître corbeau—maître corbeau—sur—sur—sur——”

Every one else was out of doors. All the little girls and boys, all the peasants, all the animals, all the birds, the dogs, and the cows ;

every one, in fact! I alone had to stay indoors all day, and learn a French fable. Why, oh, why?

“Maître corbeau—corbeau—corbeau——”

Because I put out my tongue at uncle Constantine when he came from Moscow. It is not his fault that I am shut up here. Yes, it is though. “Maître corbeau!” We were playing together, he and I—we always have a game when he comes back. Suddenly he gave me a pinch; I didn’t say anything. Then he pinched me harder, and said “Does it hurt?” I was nearly crying, and in order to keep back the tears, I put out my tongue. Mademoiselle Renault saw me, and told me I was to beg his pardon.

“Corbeau sur—corbeau sur.”

Why should I beg his pardon, when he had pinched me first?

So I said to Mademoiselle Renault: “It’s not your business!”

This happened yesterday. I was given four lines of this old “corbeau” to learn, and I refused to learn it. So here I am, shut up for the whole day in the school-room, with the same four lines in front of me. I must learn

them, I *must*. Grown-up people are wicked ; they never forget anything, and never give way on any point. One—two—three flies, buzzing about there on the ceiling. Why do they keep to the ceiling ? If only I could get up there as well, what fun that would be ! If I could fly as they can, I should fly out of the window, and go wherever I liked in the garden. But not being a fly—why should I not go into the garden ? I will go !

Cautiously I walk towards the door, my heart beating loudly. I open the door a little crack, and see no one on the landing. Downstairs I can hear the clatter of plates : it is Timothy washing up after dinner. The thought of Timothy does not trouble me, and I have no fear of the page boys ; it is only old women who are very, very dangerous. Arina—or the dwarf—and Alexander then ? He would be sure, if it was only for the pleasure of laughing at me, to tell tales. So I creep down-stairs, holding on to the banisters as I go.

“What ! you haven’t gone out with the others ? ” said Timothy.

“Where have they gone ? ”

“Oh, they are all off to the wood to pick

mushrooms. They drove away in the big brake."

"No, she has punished me again to-day."

Timothy was a sort of pariah among the other servants. He did not belong to the "home establishment," but came from the village, and his duties as table help were dish-washing and waiting on the other servants; doing, in fact, all the dirty and least desirable work. He was an old bachelor, short, thick-set, with a bushy beard which age was turning into a sort of dirty sandy colour. He looked at me sympathetically, and shook his head, whereupon I understood that I was the unhappy victim of injustice and of treachery. Every one had gone off, and left me alone. No one loved me, no one! I felt a gulf between myself and the rest of the world; I was like the child in the picture in the dwarf's room; which child, wrapped in a blue shawl, was represented as being abandoned by a woman in a red dress, who was making for a wood of massively green aspect. I was still standing on the stairs, and Timothy's red-brown neck was on a level with my head. I threw my arms round the wrinkled neck, hid my face in his bushy beard, and sobbed bitterly.

The old man stroked my hair with his wet hand, and murmured: “Poor little girl, poor little girl; they are always hard upon you.” But the more he said the more I cried. Then he sat me down on the stairs, and hunted in his pocket with a look of decision on his face. From this pocket he produced a piece of string, a wooden tobacco-box made of the bark of the beech tree, a piece of beeswax, a skein of wool, which must have come from the heap of coloured wools lying always on my aunt’s embroidery frame, a green apple, and, finally, a tiny, grey piece of sugar, with all its corners nibbled off. This he offered to me with his big discoloured fingers, which showed signs of being constantly steeped in dishwater.

Why, oh why do we lack understanding just at those moments in life when we are face to face with a noble action, or a fine feeling, which we shall perhaps never meet with again in life? This unconsciousness robs us of so much happiness, and brings so much remorse.

Why did I take that piece of sugar without experiencing an intense admiration for Timothy? Why did I not throw myself again on his neck? That little bit of sugar, picked up from among

the sweepings of the table, and rejected by the other servants, was, for this old man, a rarer and more precious delicacy than an exquisite hot-house fruit would be for a king. For in the domestic economy of those times, everything that was bought, that was not grown on the estate from unpaid labour, was of extreme value even to the gentry themselves. Not more than once a year, perhaps, would old Timothy have such a stroke of luck as the finding of this bit of sugar. And now I had deprived him of it, and had eaten it! It tasted of tobacco, pepper, dust and peppermint, but it was delicious, and it was of supreme value, for it once more brought me into touch with humanity.

Comforted and consoled, I began to notice that the whole house seemed transformed. The doors were banging, a woman's voice was singing; a man's voice could be heard in the hall; some one was whistling in the dining-room, and moving the furniture about; and from the courtyard came the vulgar sound of a concertina, and the shrill voices of women.

"Have they gone for long?" I asked.

"They won't be back for two or three hours."

"And where is my niania?"

"Pélagia Mikhailovna is having dinner in the kitchen."

"Look here, Timothy; I want to go out into the garden. Don't say a word."

"Go out, mademoiselle; I shall have seen nothing, heard nothing. That's the only way to get on in life. To see nothing, to hear nothing. Then there's no trouble. There are lots of things that I see here in the pantry. Arina asks sometimes: 'Where has the wine gone? There was half a bottle taken away from the table.' I have seen nothing, and have heard nothing. That's the only way to live."

He continued to talk, repeating his formula; but I was no longer listening. The whole atmosphere of irregularity which pervaded the house had seized on me. Good-bye to authority! A sort of sixth sense, possessed by children and animals, spoke to me of relaxation of discipline. The plates left on the table seemed to jeer at me, the dirty water trickled over the floor with conscious impertinence; the careless whistling in the dining-room emphasized the pervading disorganization. My desire to go into the garden had vanished. Why go outside when everything was so amusing in-

doors? So I strolled into the dining-room through a small door leading through a dark cupboard, generally used as a lumber-room. This door was in the usual way forbidden to us children. On the sofa lay stretched at full length Alexander, a cigarette in his mouth. When I came in he made a movement as if intending to rise, but as I shrank back instinctively, our eyes met, and we understood both of us, that as we were equally in a state of revolt against ordinary authority, he might remain at his ease, while I made my way to the drawing-room. In that shrine I found reigning the usual silence, or chilliness and ritual, which I could never bring myself to understand or recognize; but through the door leading on to the terrace I could hear a familiar humming. Two of the pages were amusing themselves spinning the top—a marvel of mechanism—which uncle Constantine had brought from Moscow for Peter. I threw myself into the game with all the more joy, because I was not generally allowed by Peter to share in the amusement afforded by the wonderful top. Mitka, the elder of the boys, evidently did not understand how to make it start; and it was the younger lad, Vanka, who was initiating him.

Thin, agile, smart, and very knowing, with black, frizzy hair, Vanka was a born servant. He enjoyed special privileges accorded him both by his masters and the other servants, although they all agreed that morally he was not an estimable character. But this lack of moral worth seemed to give him a sort of prestige. “What a monkey he is!” they would remark, in a tone of affection mingled almost with envy. I did not like him, for I felt vaguely that he was almost a “grown-up,” whilst Mitka, with his fat round face, his big grey eyes, and his straw-coloured hair, I regarded (in spite of his fifteen years) as an equal. I looked on respectfully whilst Vanka spun the top. However does he manage to do it so well, when Peter, who has had several lessons from uncle Constantine, does not yet succeed?

“Let me have a try!” I said.

“You won’t be able to manage it,” replied Vanka, with an air of importance.

“I tell you I can, if you will only show me where I have to pull the string.”

We were all three kneeling with our heads close together; Vanka was winding up the string, and I was watching attentively every

movement of his supple fingers, whilst Mitka was looking on open-mouthed. Suddenly Pélagia Mikhailovna's voice recalled me to the house, and in a moment the two boys and the top had disappeared. They jumped over the balustrade, and the next minute I heard a frightened whisper below the terrace where I stood.

When Pélagia Mikhailovna called me, I never dared to hide ; so I went to meet her with a tearful face, and with a story that I could not stay up-stairs any longer, that I felt sick, had toothache, in fact had pains everywhere, and that I felt I must go out of doors. I could detect the look of amusement in her eyes as she scolded me ; but when she had finished her reprimand, she said—

“Well, well ; go out again, and then come up-stairs ; but don't go further than the garden. Promise me.”

I promised ; I was ready to promise anything, even to learn the “Corbeau,” if only I could keep away from that horrid school-room.

The page boys were no longer below the terrace, where I had seen them last ; and I went to look for them. The house now

seemed quieter, and there was no singing up-stairs ; but in the courtyard the fun was at its height. The squeaking, long-drawn notes of the concertina marked the unequal rhythm of a rudimentary cadence too simple to be expressed on any other instrument, but which was now repeated indefinitely, with various changes of accentuation. Over and over again the leitmotif rose and fell, sometimes slowly, and then again in hurried, dancing, irresistible tripping tones. This most seductive music did not seem to enter by the ear, but penetrated through the pores of the skin into the body, bringing with it a breath of madness ; and, forgetting Pélagia Mikhailovna’s recommendation, and my own promise, I rushed joyfully from the garden to the courtyard.

Elisar, the blacksmith, with his back against the stable door, was playing the concertina. Two young stable helps, pirouetting opposite to each other, were dancing the maddening “trepack,” stamping and whirling round with bewildering agility, and shouting from time to time meaningless popular and rhythmic exclamations. Elisar followed them with his

glance, and when he observed their ardour cooling, he slowed down his playing, shouted with the boys, and, without relinquishing the concertina, joined in the dance; exciting the performers by the movements of his huge shoulders, and the gradual acceleration of the music, to renewed efforts. The dancers, as if intoxicated by the repetition of the sounds, would then start off once more with renewed energy, stamping, pointing their toes, pirouetting, whirling—then they slid across the smooth ground as if sliding over a polished floor.

I pushed my way to the front row of the compact mass of spectators, and my eyes followed every movement of the dancers. The music intoxicated me just as it did the peasants, and every muscle of my body thrilled in unison; so that though I stood still I seemed to move with the dancers, while the tune which Elisar drew from the concertina seemed to give me a strange choking sensation in the throat. Shouts of approbation rose among the on-lookers, who now and then uttered the same strident cry of the dancers; whilst I felt as if every fresh sign of approbation were addressed to myself. How good life was, when one

could sometimes have such delightful experiences ! The dancers, tired out at last, stopped, and with their shirt sleeves wiped the perspiration from their foreheads.

The group of spectators broke up, and some children began to imitate the dance. I remained among the grown-up peasants, who were chatting and laughing noisily. One of the dancers pinched a young peasant girl, who was standing near me, and who replied to his advances with hearty blows of her fist on his back ; he laughed and pinched her again. This reminded me of the way we children played and romped together, and it seemed to me very funny to watch others doing the same thing. But after a little time, without exactly understanding why, I moved away from this couple. Jokes and laughter sounded on all sides ; the air was thick with broad peasant words. We children also sometimes used these words, when nobody was by to hear. They seemed to us amusing, and made us laugh. The servants who surrounded me were also laughing loudly, and every word was greeted with a fresh explosion of gross merri-

ment. I had now, however, no inclination to laugh ; I even felt uncomfortable, and almost shamefaced.

Now and then the men would disappear into the stable, where I could hear the clink of glasses. Timothy came running up ; and his arrival was greeted with renewed exclamations of joy. He showed Elisar something wrapped in a serviette, and then followed the rest into the stable. Now I observed that the faces around me grew red, and the voices sounded strange. The feeling of shame within me increased—an inexplicable shame, which filled my whole being, as did sometimes an inexplicable fear. All these people around me, whom I knew so well by name, whom I was in the habit of seeing every day, appeared to me now as unknown and strange. And unknown faces, which did not belong to the circle of my acquaintances, always aroused in me a feeling of fear, and even of hostility. Instinctively I tried to draw away from this crowd, which was growing every moment noisier and noisier ; but at the same time an evil curiosity kept me rooted to the spot.

Finally, when a real quarrel started suddenly between the dancer who had pinched the peasant girl, and Elisar; when I saw their two faces flushed with anger, and heard their terrible threats, muttered in defiance of the attempts of two older men, who did their best to calm them down, I ran away as fast as I could, and sought shelter elsewhere. Instead of making for the garden or the park—in the ordinary course of events such safe places of refuge—I returned to the house, and even sought shelter in the up-stairs room, where Pélagia Mikhailovna was waiting for me.

I found her there, seated on a chest, presiding over a confabulation which was taking place between the dwarf and Arina “the viper.” Without saying a word, I went to my bed, lay down, and shut my eyes. The notes of the concertina still rang through my brain, shutting out every other thought; whilst red, inflamed, stupid faces floated in a black cloud before my closed eyes.

The tinkling of a bell recalled me to real life. They were returning! And the fable of the “Corbeau”? Goodness! What will

happen to me? I rush into the school-room, seize my book. What miracle has taken place? I suddenly discover that I know the four lines by heart, quite perfectly. But another miracle awaited me during this most extraordinary day. An hour later I was summoned by Mademoiselle Renault, quite simply and without any fuss, to come and have tea. She had a strange look on her face, and she said no word about the "Corbeau." Could she have forgotten? But how could a "grown-up" forget a thing which was considered so important?

Peter told me about the wonderful adventures they had met with in the wood; but added that the excursion was nevertheless tiresome, because grandmamma was in a bad temper. Mademoiselle Renault and uncle Constantine lost their way, and they had to be hunted for a long time when all the rest were ready to start back. After all, they were not found, but returned by themselves.

That evening I overheard a scrap of conversation between my mother and uncle Constantine. Mamma seemed a little angry—not very much, however; and my uncle said to

her : “ Preaching morality does not suit your style of beauty, Sophie ! ” and then he laughed.

He laughed exactly in the same way as the menservants and the grooms laughed, as they stood that afternoon near the stables.

BIG ELISAR

VIII

BIG ELISAR

EVERY servant in grandmamma's house had his or her speciality. Gania, the ladies' maid, could dress hair, and every Saturday night she put my hair into curl-papers, because on Sunday we drove to church in grandmamma's carriage. If any one had a sore throat it was Arina, "the viper," who applied a stocking, rubbed with soap and tallow candle, to the throat of the patient. The remedy smelt horribly, but it had its pleasant side, as one was let off lessons the next day. The coachmen harnessed the horses and cleaned the carriages; the cook prepared dinner; the weavers, who lived at some distance, wove blue cloth; Nicholas, the carpenter, made furniture. In a word, each one had his own work, and kept to it. But there was one man who knew how to do everything—Big Elisar, the blacksmith. There was another

Elisar among the domestic servants, who was small and sickly ; he used to help the shepherd, and his only talent consisted in the skill with which he cracked his long whip, that had a thong of two yards. The crack of that whip sounded like the report of a pistol. It was probably to distinguish the blacksmith from this small, insignificant creature that he was always known as Big Elisar.

Elisar the blacksmith was exceptionally tall ; and, big though he seemed in the open air, it was nothing to what he appeared when he stepped into a house, for his head looked then as if it were going through the ceiling.

So, whenever any work was to be done, the servant whose speciality it was would be called upon to do it ; but Big Elisar, besides doing all the iron work on the estate, mended many things which got out of order about the house ; and if grandmamma, or any one else, had a fancy for having something made, of which no pattern existed, Big Elisar used to be called upon to design it. He did not live in the courtyard, or in the village ; his house was a long way away, near a pond ; and the pond was on the extreme limits of our domain as children, in

a part where even Peter never went alone. Elisar, therefore, was not one of the people whom we often saw. Sometimes, when we drove over to visit some neighbour (a very rare occurrence), we passed by the forge. As soon as the avenue was left behind, and the horses were trotting along the straight wide road, we could hear the distant sound of the ringing blows struck on the anvil ; and as we drew nearer to the forge the sounds became more and more deafening. I was able then to catch a glimpse of the black shed, where a ruddy flame, shooting out showers of sparks, seemed ever to be burning. That dark, and yet glowing spot was, for me, as full of terrors as the thought of some terrible and superhuman force.

The first time I saw Big Elisar quite near was one morning at early breakfast, when grandmamma had had an accident with her wonderful coffee-machine. This famous and most rare object had refused the night before to act ; and grandmamma had herself washed and taken it to pieces ; for she was unwilling to confide to the care of any servant such a precious object. She, however, was not able to readjust the various parts, and now the

wonderful glass bowl, into which the coffee rose by itself in such an unaccountable manner, lay on a large tray surrounded by the shining metal boiler, the tap, the screws, the cover, and all the little metal nuts, a useless wreck. The coffee-machine, as a coffee-machine, no longer existed. Arina had to pour out grandmamma's coffee into the green china cup from a quite commonplace copper coffee-pot, which shone, it is true, very brilliantly, was exceedingly amusing to watch, but in no ways resembled the beautiful broken coffee-machine. Although I was overflowing with feelings of condolence towards grandmamma, these feelings were not unmixed with a spice of malice: Even grown-up people, it seems, break things sometimes "on purpose."

I had often enjoyed the process myself of "breaking things on purpose," and found it very amusing; why, then, should there be such a fuss made every time that we broke our toys "on purpose"? Grandmamma seems very sorry now for what she has done; well, all the better! We also are often very sorry after we have broken something; but we get scolded, and no one says anything to grandmamma.

Now, however, Elisar was announced, and a

giant came in. He seemed to me so tall that I thought his head, covered with its plentiful crop of fiery red hair, would touch the ceiling. Two green, searching eyes swept with a rapid glance the table, us children, and grandmamma. All his movements bespoke an ease which bordered on carelessness. The huge mouth, with the short upper lip, seemed to smile whenever he spoke, showing two rows of dazzlingly white teeth ; the wide, large nose, the low, broad forehead, all gave to his face an expression of good-humour and of gaiety, and seemed to say : " I am glad to be here ; I feel good, and you also, you are all good."

"Elisar," said grandmamma, "my Moscow coffee-pot has been broken ; can you repair it?"

Elisar stepped up to the tray, and examined attentively, one by one, the different parts. Every one else stood round. I watched almost with awe this man, as he held in one of his enormous hands the transparent globe, and in the other the metal boiler. His hands, in spite of their size, were extremely delicate in their movements. It almost seemed as if the tiniest objects were attracted by the long nervous fingers, instead of his having to pick things up.

I knew that Elisar could do anything ; I knew that once he had mended a china vase which some one had broken, and which now stood looking quite whole in one of the cabinets of the drawing-room. Often had I observed that vase being shown, with the remark : " Big Elisar mended that with some glue of his own invention." But I must confess, at this solemn moment I had my doubts about his omnipotence ; for the wreckage that lay on the tray bore no resemblance to grandmamma's wonderful coffee-machine. I cannot help thinking that grandmamma also had her doubts, for, in a quite humble, almost caressing voice, she asked : " Well, what do you think about it ? Will you be able to put it together again ? "

At last the giant spoke—

" Why not ? Some man must have put it together at first."

And these words brought back to my heart a feeling of confidence.

Elisar went off, carrying with him the tray, with the remains of the coffee-machine. Forming a respectful escort, we followed him to the front door, and I watched him as, with a light step and his head in the air, he walked away,

swinging one hand and carrying the tray with the other. The wind played in his long red hair, and swelled out his red shirt, which glowed amongst the trees of the park, like the fire of his own forge.

The next day everybody heard the news that the coffee-machine was mended and put together; and we were also told that it had never worked so well before, even in its early days. Elisar, with an excess of zeal, had soldered on to the tap a little brass bird. This bird turned out to be a trinket which uncle Constantine had lost last year.

And now it was found!

Everybody laughed about it, for tricks of this sort were quite in the style of Elisar, who was honest according to his own code, but had no scruples in matters of this nature. He was often sent into the town to make purchases; he brought back faithfully all the orders, and never wasted the money confided to him, but if he came across anything which took his fancy he annexed it without allowing his conscience to be in the least disturbed; according to him, he *took*, he did not steal. He was just as ready to give as he was to take. His all-round skill

assured him a privileged position. He was "a tenant in his own right," and in no ways obliged to work for his "masters." He might if he had chosen have lived outside the village, but he did not care to do so. His "masters" had a decided weakness for him ; he was to them a sort of spoilt child, and at the same time a most useful man, of whom they were justly proud. He was not generally paid for his services, but he received presents of corn, animals, and sometimes even of money. Any other man but Elisar would, with all this help, have been in a comfortable position, but he was always miserably poor. All that was given him, and all that he earned was immediately spent in drink, in the company of any one he met on the road, and who was willing to follow him to the public-house. Besides the cost of these fraternal libations, he gave right and left, just as he was asked to give, and with perfect willingness. The peasants, and the landed proprietors of the neighbouring villages, knew well that when Elisar was in the humour, or was drunk, he would do any amount of work for ridiculous pay ; or even sometimes for nothing. At other times he would ask exorbitant prices, and would, besides, insist on

being humbly entreated to do the work at all.

These peculiarities of Elisar's were discussed at the dinner table the morning that the coffee-machine made its re-appearance. Grandmamma wished to present Elisar with a rouble, and uncle Constantine approved of her intention ; whilst my aunt and mamma protested, and declared that Elisar was sure to get drunk on the money, and that then there would be trouble.

All these discussions interested me immensely, and I listened attentively, with my eyes fixed on the coffee-machine. It seemed to be alive and singing a gay little song ; then, suddenly, the froth began to rise in the crystal bowl with a little whispering, hissing noise. How, I wondered, had Elisar been able to re-create this living thing, which yesterday seemed irremediably destroyed ?

A thin ray of sunlight, coming into the room through a crack in the lowered venetian blind, fell full on the shining tap, and I could see quite clearly that the little bird placed by Elisar on the tap was jumping and bobbing about. Its outstretched wings shook, its little

head and extended neck moved from one side to the other.

“What a clever devil that Elisar is!” said my uncle Constantine, continuing the discussion: “hands of gold, a head of fire; but on the whole not a bad man.”

What could uncle Constantine mean? Elisar had a fiery head and hands of gold; he was a devil, and yet he was good. All this meant much more to me than my uncle meant to imply. I felt quite convinced that Elisar, in his dark hut lit up by fiery sparks, was a good magician. It was even highly probable that he was not a peasant at all. Perhaps he was an exiled king, whom some black and bad magician had transformed into a blacksmith. Did I not know very well that kings and princes were transformed every day into ravens or into swans? And here was the thing in real life; for Elisar had made a real bird out of an old brass trinket. It was true that when I looked closely at the bird it did not move; but I remembered one of the characteristics of magic objects was that they could take on at will the appearance of life. Whilst an old-world belief held possession of my soul, an ardent

faith grew and ripened in my heart ; and a majestic and bold project sprang up within me.

In the transitory and perishable world of toys I claimed among my possessions a glorious and most cherished ruin—a “musical house.” To others, no doubt, it appeared to be a musical box with a handle ; but on this box were pictured a house, with a balcony to every storey, and a green, wide-stretching lawn, on which little figures danced around in a ring. A tiny woman in a red petticoat and black bodice stood at the door of the house, never joining in the dance. All the windows of the house were lit up, and shone with warm red light. It was evident that people lived inside. As soon as the handle was turned, invisible musicians played within. What a joy it was then to watch the little figures dancing !

This box used to belong to mamma, but we had so often and so vigorously turned the handle that one day the musicians refused to play. Then the box was given to me, but, alas ! it had lost its charm. The little figures danced listlessly, and though the windows of the house were still lit up, the dancers were, to

me, uninspired, and the house empty. The musical house had become a useless but precious relic. I could not, however, make up my mind to take it to pieces, and it remained in a corner of a drawer wrapped in the cast-off pink petticoat of a doll.

As Elisar had succeeded not only in mending the coffee-machine, but had also added to his work a living bird, why could he not mend the musical house, and fill it with new musicians? It seems to me now that my feelings on the subject of these musicians was a double one. There were moments when I was in doubt as to their existence; but I had so often declared to my brother that I knew they were there, and I had so often described in detail their life, their habits, their faces, their furniture; I had so often told him how I had myself been into the little house, that I finally believed in the reality of these musicians. This belief was very dear to me, and the moments of doubt I sometimes experienced were horribly painful.

This apparition of the brass bird, which was nevertheless alive, by demonstrating practically the possibility of marvels happening in everyday life, re-kindled my ancient faith and com-

pelled me to form a decision. I must, at any cost, manage to interview Big Elisar in his own home, where he reigned as a magician, and I must confide to him the "musical house," and beg him to repair the mechanism and create new musicians.

As no one could alone have carried out an enterprise of such far-reaching importance without help or advice, I hastened to confide my project to the boys, who, I must confess, did not at once grasp the vastness and beauty of the idea. My suggestion was to go alone at night to Elisar's hut, carrying the "musical house," and to beg him to make new musicians and place them inside the house. Besides this, we were to watch as closely as possible in order to see how Elisar set to work to accomplish these marvels. I had to explain twice over this delightful project to the boys, and after a few moments of silence my brother remarked—

"Go in the night? Why, we couldn't find the road, and the wolves would eat us!"

"I could find the way," interrupted Peter. "But, listen ; this is what we must do. I'll tell grandmamma what we have planned ; she will

order the carriage for us, and we will drive there. Isn't that a good idea?"

I would not listen to this suggestion. Go and tell the "grown-ups" of our plans? Never! If Peter spoke about it they would send for Elisar, and the box would be handed over to him, with the result that we should never be able to get inside his magic retreat, or fathom the mysteries that surrounded it.

Then I dramatized our proposed journey, and the immense dangers which we should encounter; the marvellous adventures that awaited us, and how, at last, as a reward for our exertions, we should discover Elisar in a cave, clad in a long black cloak spangled with gold and silver stars, and holding in his hand a magician's wand. As I talked and described the journey it seemed to become an actual reality. At one moment we met the gypsies, who tried to rob us; we fought and conquered them; the chief of the gypsies asked our forgiveness, and promised never more to attack children. I could have gone on talking indefinitely, but the boys were now as excited as I was about the great project, and they hastened to amplify the story with further adventures. At last they had

taken in the great idea, and the journey was decided on.

How many were the hours we passed discussing this journey to Elisar's cave, and what exciting and happy hours they were.

Peter, the eldest of the party, and the boy with the practical mind, took upon himself the duty of leading the expedition, and assumed the air of a protector. He proposed that we should lay in provisions and obtain three knapsacks for carrying our baggage ; finally he declared that he must get a horse for me, as no girl could do such a journey on foot. As, after anxious discussion, the impossibility of procuring such an addition to the expedition became evident even to Peter, we decided finally to content ourselves with Caro, the largest of the watch-dogs, who lived in the courtyard ; he would be much more useful than a horse, and might protect us from the wolves. As my brother constantly referred to the perils of a midnight journey, that part of the plan was also dropped—I must confess, not altogether to my sorrow. Without talking of wolves, my courage in the dark was never great ; and if, in my first moments of enthusiasm, I spoke of going at night, it was always with

the secret hope that my companions would refuse to act on the suggestion. Travelling, as we meant to do, by day, we could not follow the ordinary road, as that would have led us through the avenue, where we should have been seen. There was nothing left for it, then, but to go by the park, the same way as Elisar went. We must reach the pond, said Peter, go round it, and then travel on. But where? The rest was terribly vague. At last the day came when everything was ready for our departure. The boys went to the kitchen garden and returned with a dozen onions. Ever since the expedition had been decided on we had at each meal slipped surreptitiously into our pockets pieces of meat, and bread, and biscuits. I had succeeded in abstracting from one of the cupboards three pillow-cases, which were to be used as knapsacks. All our provisions were hidden in a dark corner under the terrace. Peter had attracted Caro by feeding him all the day with pieces of meat, and the dog followed him about now every time that Peter left the house.

Luck seemed to be with us, for grandmamma, my aunt, and mamma set off one morning to

spend a few days with an uncle, who had fallen suddenly ill and had asked for them. The carriage was disappearing down the avenue when Peter whispered in my ear—

“We must start, you know, to-day.”

It was only when I heard these words that I fully realized the incredible audacity of our undertaking. Perhaps I turned pale, for Peter, after watching me a moment, inquired hesitatingly—

“Don’t you mean to go?”

Not for the world would I have allowed any momentary weakness to overcome me, and I replied in a haughty tone—

“You idiot!”

During the rest of the morning, and at lunch time, we were models of good behaviour. After lunch we accompanied Mademoiselle Renault into the lime walk, and after she had begged us to continue our good conduct, she returned to the house.

Immediately, without a word to each other, we rushed to the terrace, and crammed our knapsacks with bread, meat and onions; then in hurried whispers—

“Wait whilst I get Caro!”

"Are you sure you will be able to find the way?"

"Shut up, or they will hear us!"

Peter soon returned, dragging Caro by the collar. The great watch dog looked at us suspiciously; but a piece of meat, judiciously offered, seemed to reassure him.

With a full heart I followed Peter, who, with a hasty glance round the house, walked down the terrace with a firm step, and looking quite unconcerned. Now we were under the trees, close to the lane where we generally played. I thought I knew every tree, every branch; but to-day they no longer looked the same; we were walking through a thick unknown forest full of hidden dangers. The dried fir-cones cracked under our feet with strange unrecognized noise. A woodpecker struck the trunk of a tree with his beak; and the tap sounded like the blows of a small hammer. Who could be hammering so far, far, far away? Crows, flying high above the trees, cawed harshly; and the mournful and yet familiar sound awoke within me an acute desire to return to the lime-tree walk. Suddenly Peter stopped; he had forgotten to bring any guns! What was to be done? I

understood that the forgotten guns were only a pretext, and that he was really afraid. His fear awoke my courage ; there was nothing now for it but to go on, and trust to Caro to defend us. Let us each take a stick. Forward now—for the road before us is a long one !

We walked on and on, bent under the weight of our knapsacks, starting at every sound, watching anxiously the bushes, and avoiding the wide roads which crossed our path. How long we walked I cannot remember. But it seemed hours and hours. At last Caro stopped and began to sniff round the trunks of the trees. Peter made us a sign, and we threw ourselves flat on the ground, so that the unknown enemy, who must be close by, should not see us. But once more Caro ran on, and, reassured, we followed him. Were we walking forward or in a circle ? Frankly, I cannot now say, for Peter, who was our guide, turned a hundred times to the right and to the left. At last I suggested a halt. We each of us ate an onion and a piece of bread ; Caro was given more meat, and once more we started off through the virgin forest. Ahead of us appeared the white trunks of young birch trees, fluttering their frail green leaves ;

but around us where we walk, there was nothing but thick bushes, rising almost above our heads. We struggled on through this mass of branches, twigs and brambles, till we reached the outer edge of the terrible forest. Here Peter declared that, as night was coming on, we must lie down and sleep ; for the pond, which was now not far off, was approached by a dangerous and deceptive bog, which could only be crossed by running over it without stopping. Any one stopping in the middle of the bog would be immediately swallowed up and destroyed. So we ate our supper of another piece of bread and an onion, and lay down to sleep.

The night passed quickly, and we were awakened by Caro, who rushed forward to meet a brigand, bearing a strange resemblance to Timothy, one of the menservants. He was walking smilingly in the direction where we lay hidden in the underwood, and, guessing his sinister intentions, we remained quiet, and gave no sign of our presence. He caught hold of Caro. Poor faithful companion ! We listened to his warning bark, which seemed to tell us that all was over. Hurriedly we held a council of war. Was it possible to go on without Caro, and

without arms? I suggested that the brigand was a wicked magician, who took on him the appearance of Timothy, and that consequently neither dog nor arms would be of any use against his magic, therefore we should as soon as possible reach the cave of the good magician, and place ourselves under his protection.

“Forward, then!”

Peter, in a magnificent warlike address, reminded us that we had before us the task of crossing the fathomless bog, which floated above a dark lake, just as the little islands in a neighbouring estate floated on the surface of the river. Then, leaving the forest behind him, he started off running.

As I followed him at full speed towards the deep and treacherous bog, my heart beat as if it would burst. The land we crossed sloped gently towards the pond, which lay in peaceful beauty at the further end of the park. On one side willows dipped their long leaves into its water; on the other side a wooden dam led the overflow into a smaller and lower pond. Beyond the water lay the vast yellow unknown fields. We had nearly reached the edge of the pond,

and could already see the pathway leading to the spot where we were in the habit of bathing, when Peter, in order to avoid a particularly dangerous part of the bog, turned off, and started to make an immense detour. I was already out of breath—should I ever be able to reach the goal? Or should I at last, being forced to stop, find myself sinking in the sticky mud, and falling—falling ever deeper and deeper in the bottomless black lake? The horror of the thought called forth in me a last effort, and I found myself panting but safe on the edge of the pond.

Peter, who had declared so many times that we had to go round the pond in order to reach the forge, now said that we must step, one by one, over the dam; and that we must go across very carefully, because underneath lay the arctic sea, and we might, if we fell in, be eaten by white bears. I protested that there could not be an arctic sea in summer.

My brother suggested we might be swallowed by a whale. We reminded him that this was no time for "make believe."

At last we agreed that the board placed

across the dam should be a boat, and in this boat we would cross to the other side of the sea.

What a magnificent crossing we had, sitting on the board, our feet in the water, and rowing with our sticks and with our feet! Once on the other side night came on once more, and we again lay down—but this time without supper. After a time I announced that the sun had risen, and that we must go on. Peter argued that the night had scarcely begun, but was finally forced to recognize that it was really daylight; and led by him, we once more started off on our journey.

Having doubts regarding his capabilities as leader, I asked him after a time—

“Are you sure of the road?”

“Yes,” he answered, looking vaguely to right and left.

He pushed through a hedge, and on the other side the corn, like a swaying curtain, barred our way. Peter shouldered his way through the thick yellow depths, and with the courage of despair (for I realized now he did not know the way) I followed him as best I could. Our faces were whipped with the heavy

hanging heads of corn, but we still struggled bravely on, till we were swallowed up in the golden flood.

At last Peter stops. "You have lost your way," cries my brother.

"I know the way quite well—but I have forgotten it for a minute."

Just at this moment I hear behind us the ringing sound of iron being struck on the anvil. Peter hears it at the same time, and turns in the direction of the sound. We find our way out of the cornfield, and discover a tiny little cottage, looking as if it had just grown out of the earth. Its broken windows are stuffed with many-coloured rags, and seem to watch us with evil eyes. Three full-blown sun-flowers, with dried, blackened leaves, hanging like rags from the stalks, bend sadly their enormous blooms towards the earth, and stand as sentinels before the humble home.

We can see the forge, which seems to beckon us, at the end of the road ; but this hut—does it shelter brigands, or is it the hovel of a sorceress ?

A tall, thin, ugly woman comes to the door, carrying in her arms a miserable child, its face

covered with scabs. The child must be stolen, and the woman must be a gypsy.

"Good-morning, young gentlemen ; good morning, young lady. What are you doing here ?" says the gypsy ; and I recognize the woman then as Elisar's wife.

"We are looking for Elisar," said Peter.

"Come in, come in ; he is here. Elisar, here are the young gentlemen, who want to see you."

And without waiting for us to explain, she leads us across a little yard, heaped up with manure, and into a small, dark, unventilated room, smelling horribly stuffy and sour. A huge stove takes up a third of the room. Alas ! it is not a cave, but the usual *isba* interior, of which I had seen so many.

Elisar, stretched on a bench, is fast asleep. When his wife succeeds in waking him, he stares at us a long time without saying a word. At last, collecting his ideas, he mutters, "Good-morning ; sit down, and you shall be my guests."

But we stand there dumb and motionless in the middle of the room.

"Who are you out with ?" asks the woman.

"We came alone," says Peter. "I showed them the way. Elisar, can you mend a box for Sasha?"

Oh, this was not at all what he ought to have said. I felt that he had spoilt the whole thing. Was that the way to speak to a magician?"

"What sort of box?" questioned Elisar, looking at me with his laughing eyes.

How could I possibly explain that it was the "musical house"? I could not stammer out a word. When Peter observed my embarrassment, he said, "Show it to him." Show it to him—but where was it? I had quite forgotten to bring the musical box; it still lay in the drawer at home wrapped up in the pink petticoat.

Peter glanced at me, but, as usual, failed entirely to understand what was going on in my thoughts; so he added—"Come back with us, Elisar; she has left the box at home, and it's a beautiful box."

So we all walked back with Elisar to the house; and it appeared that no one had noticed our "three days' absence."

Elisar carried the box off and mended it, so that though the music was different from

what it was in the old days, still it played tunes.

But why, ever since, and in spite of all the years that have passed, do I feel a vague melancholy every time that I hear the "Freischütz" waltz played on a musical box?

TO VLADIMIR DE HOLSTEIN

GREY DAYS

IX

GREY DAYS

LIKE a once beautiful plaything, now worn out and half destroyed, the country was beginning to show signs of change. Verdure no longer reigned supreme, but a shade of yellow was creeping over trees, grass and shrubs. One by one the dead leaves fluttered down from the trees, and those that still remained on the branches looked dry and sapless. The grass in the fields, which used to reach to my waist, had been cut long ago, and had not grown again ; whilst the fields themselves looked like enormous yellow-brown straw mats, which crackled and scrunched under our feet. Further afield, where once were green-grey strips of rye, white strips of buckwheat, and blue strips of flax, there remained nothing now but an immense drab plain. And this world of drab grey colour, with its flowerless fields, became, it

seemed to me, simpler ; for it had lost, not only its brilliancy, but also its mystery. What a host of things were hidden formerly among that labyrinth of tall sturdy stalks ! Who could affirm with certainty that there were not tigers, and even crocodiles, in the depths of that waving grass ? And was it indeed nothing but grass ? When one lay flat on one's stomach, hidden in its dreamy, scented depths, everything else—sky, trees, bushes disappeared, and one's eyes wandered in a labyrinth of stalks, leaves and flowers of every size, colour and shape. As one watched and wondered, the whole marvellous miniature landscape through which the eyes roved, would become a tropical forest, just like one of those one had seen depicted in books ; with slender upspringing trees, bearing enormous leaves. Then a breeze would lightly shake the enchanted forest, and murmurs, whispers, would awake ; and a vague caressing breath would play softly round the face, and refresh the heated brow. Who was speaking, who was moving in the depths of this green, purple, pink and yellow world ? And now, nothing was left of all that delicious mystery. In vain one lay on

the yellow-brown earth. The grass remained grass ; it had lost its voices and its murmurings ; and one could discover everywhere under it the drab earth from which it grew.

Were these, I wonder, my thoughts one morning, when, as I woke up, I asked myself, "What shall I do to-day?" and found the only answer to be : "I haven't an idea ; nothing tempts me."

Even during breakfast I am haunted with the same feeling ; nothing tempts me. There is nothing, nothing that I seem especially to desire. The pastry has always the same taste : I turn from it with disgust. I soak a biscuit in my cup of milk, and then I leave it all, milk and biscuit, without even trying to hide this forbidden action, as I should have done in the ordinary way ; for nothing appears to me to matter, even the perspective of such a piece of ill-luck as that of a scolding at the beginning of the day.

The time for lessons comes round ; I creep apathetically into the school-room, and mechanically I read ; I blacken a page of my copy-book. I listen with abnormal patience to a discourse from Mademoiselle Renault ; for wanderings round the house have lost their charm, and I no longer pant for freedom. Mademoiselle Renault

is very pleased with me, and she promises to love me, if I continue to show such application.

Lessons finished, instead of fleeing as usual from the society of my companions, in order to yield myself entirely to the delightful pleasures which I, in the usual way, know so well how to discover, I go and look up the boys, for to-day I feel incapable of amusing myself alone. Nothing, nothing tempts me.

The boys, with some of the children of the servants, were that day playing at knuckle-bones in the big avenue which ran from the house to the village. This was a game I cared for very little; I was short-sighted, and possessed neither the skill nor the turn of wrist which seemed to come by instinct to boys. I could not manage to throw the dibs with that precise movement of the wrist which ensured a good aim, but I threw them "like a girl." I made bad shots, and, overcome with a feeling of inferiority, I grew more miserable every moment. I nevertheless insisted on continuing to play; and took no notice of Peter's contemptuous exclamations; he was very skilful at this game, and very proud of his superiority.

Two or three boys and girls who had been sent into the wood to gather whortleberries wandered along the avenue, carrying baskets made of bark, full of blue-black fruit, covered over with a layer of green leaves. Their lips and fingers were blackened with the juicy, ripe fruit. Peter at once suggested we should play at brigands, and rob the pilgrims, that is to say the children, who were carrying the fruit. This game also failed to tempt me. The pilgrims were, however, attacked, without my taking any part in the struggle ; they wept and cried loudly. Pélagia Mikhailovna, who was supposed to be looking after us, hastened to establish order, and took away from Peter a basket of fruit, which he had seized. In the struggle half the fruit tumbled out on the ground. Peter declared he was going to complain to grandmamma ; Pélagia Mikhailovna announced her intention of doing the same. They all set off, my old nurse, the pilgrims and the brigands, in a procession towards the house, whilst I remained behind and ate, one by one, the whortleberries which had been spilt on the path, and which were all covered with dust. In the distance I could hear Peter shouting and repeating: " They

are my people, and my whortleberries ; they are all mine ! ”

After our one o'clock dinner, time seems longer than ever. I have to sit under the lime trees with Mademoiselle Renault, and talk French. In the good old days I used to try and get sent on an errand, and then run away ; or, taking advantage of an unguarded moment on the part of my governess, I used to disappear without vouchsafing an excuse. But now I sit passive and quiet on the bench, swinging my legs, without thought, and without desire. Strange, and apparently unknown words hum in my brain, jingle and dance in my head : “ La pompe-la trombe ; l'avenir-venir-perché.” Then whole sentences learnt painfully by heart jolt through my memory : “ La grammaire est l'art de parler et d'écrire correctement.” An insect settles on my dress, and distracts my attention for a moment ; I snip it off and once more plunge into a strange unreal torpor.

“ Sasha, why don't you do something ? ” says Mademoiselle Renault, looking up from her embroidery.

She suggests we shall make some sand pies. I refuse.

Peter and my brother are astride on the seat close by ; they are off on a distant journey, but they do not know where. That is because I am the one who is always called upon to suggest the itinerary of our journeys.

“ I say ! Will you come for a ride ? ” says my brother.

“ No.”

“ Tell us where you want to go ? ”

“ Leave me alone ; I don’t want to play.”

No, to-day I don’t care even to play ; I want nothing, nothing, nothing.

If only there were some sun ! Only yesterday long, white clouds trailed across the sky ; later on grey masses, which seemed to rise out of space, covered the whole heaven. They spread and spread, until a grey, unbroken mass hid the sun ; and the world grew darker than ever. No rain fell, but now and again little uncertain drops of moisture sprinkled the leaves ; and the trees, with their motionless hanging branches, awaited sadly and expectantly the longed-for moisture. But to-day the rain begins to fall steadily, and we have to go in-doors. Gently, evenly, comes the patter on

the waiting leaves of the monotonous drip, drip of the summer rain.

In the hall two pages, and some peasants, who have evidently come a long way, for they carry sacks on their backs, rise respectfully from the wooden bench, which runs all round the wall.

In a room beyond, my uncle Constantine is singing and accompanying himself noisily on a piano which is out of tune and gives forth the thin sound of an old instrument that has been played on too long. Mamma and my aunt are listening, and nodding their heads to the time. From the drawing-room comes grand-mamma's peevish voice, sounding like that of a spoilt child: "The whole flounce is spoilt; it is worthless. Why don't you look after things properly? You are an idle lot, all of you!"

And the gentle voice of the dwarf, in reply, deprecatingly suggests, affirms and denies.

The polished floor shines cold and slippery as ice, reflecting the heavy, black, horsehair-covered chairs, with their projecting backs, which seem severely to forbid any careless or restful lounging.

I go up to one of the long mirrors, placed between the windows, and I look curiously and attentively at a little girl in a white dress of doubtful freshness ; with untidy hair, a large mouth, and who happens to be also looking at me with grey, sad, curious eyes. The hard searching look she gives me is almost disagreeable ; the little girl seems to me very ugly. I know that this ugly little girl is myself, but I have never realized before I am so ugly. It is a terrible discovery. I have evidently spent a long time in front of the mirror, for all of a sudden I hear a great burst of laughter, and, turning round, I see my uncle Constantine pointing to me.

“ Why are you grimacing like that in front of a looking-glass ? ” says my aunt.

“ She is a woman ; that’s why ! Look at her, how she is blushing ! ” replies uncle, still laughing.

Yes, I am blushing, and my blood is pulsing in my ears. Shame at the thought of having been spied on by these “grown-ups,” who understand nothing, clutches at my heart ; the idea of one of my most intimate thoughts having been seized upon by them fills me with despair.

I long to cry, but will not give way to the longing, for fear that may give them pleasure. I simply move away from the glass, and in order to appear unconcerned I go and look out of the window. On the terrace the rain falls steadily; the fir trees glisten with a mist of fine rain-drops, which now and again collect at the point of the fir needles, and fall with a splash on the ground, striking, as they fall, a sonorous note, contrasting lugubriously with the hiss of the long uninterrupted stream of water which falls in a straight shower from the sky. "I am ugly, very ugly; but I don't mind, I don't mind anything."

Alexander announces that the peasants from Malivo are waiting in the hall to see grandmamma.

"Mamma, the people from Malivo, whom you sent for, are here; will you see them?" cries uncle Constantine.

"Lord, how tiresome they are!" replies grandmamma, from the drawing-room. "One never has a moment to oneself! No, I am busy now. Tell them to go to the kitchen, and wait till I send for them."

Uncle Constantine shrugs his shoulders,

and exchanges a meaning glance with mamma ; then he goes back to his song. I take advantage of this diversion to escape from the overpowering society of the "grown-ups," and I run out into the hall. The peasants are just leaving it, and I watch them, through the window, as they cross the great open courtyard in Indian file, with lowered heads and bent backs, on which falls incessantly the drip, drip, drip of the rain. For a long time I stand watching, until the black figures seen against the grey background of the outbuildings have all disappeared into the kitchen, which is situated at the extreme end of the courtyard. A peculiar choking sensation takes possession of me, and I say to myself : "They are poor."

I must explain that this reflection of mine applied very much more to myself than to the men whom I was watching. For us children the word "poor" did not mean material poverty, but expressed suffering, regret, or sorrow on our own part at the sight of anything or anybody "poor"; who were only "poor" in our sense, inasmuch as they made *us* feel unhappy. For us the opposite to "poor" was neither "rich" nor "happy," but was "jolly." Thus, if

one of us broke a toy, we would ask, "Is it poor?" If the destructive person regretted his mischief, he would reply: "Yes, very poor." If, however, the toy had been broken on purpose, and its owner was not in the least concerned about its loss, he would reply: "Not at all." Sometimes we would remark among ourselves: "Everything is poor!" Which remark indicated profound unhappiness on the part of the child who made it.

This procession of bent human beings did appear to me "poor"—so poor that the whole sad, grey world seemed insupportably miserable to an ugly little girl like myself, whom people laughed at, and who cared for nothing, nothing, nothing.

So I wandered up to the embroidery room, for I found after a time the solitude of the hall unbearable. Everything in this room was upside down; the various materials were being removed from the frames, and new pieces were being put on. I heard that grandmamma was very displeased with the work that had been done lately. The dwarf had returned from her interview in the drawing-room in the worst of tempers; she had treated every one to scoldings

and punishments. Two or three of the embroidery girls were crying, and abusing the dwarf, grandmamma, and every one in the world. The little girls, who were generally sitting on forms against the wall, knitting stockings, were now running from one frame to another, helping the embroideresses to stretch the fresh materials; and if they were wanting in quickness, or skill, they received slaps, or a box on the ear. In spite of the electric atmosphere engendered by the prevailing anger, no voice was raised; and when a blow resounded through the room, the abuse which accompanied it was hissed out in a whisper.

Then, for the first time since our arrival in the country, I felt constrained to behave as I had been told model children behaved; since everything around me—little girls, embroideresses, the dwarf even, were “poor,” I sought refuge in the school-room, took up an illustrated fairy tale book, and read till the evening.

I cannot say that I read in the sense that Mademoiselle Renault would call reading; but I read in my own fashion. Two or three lines, or a word or two caught here and there, were quite sufficient, with the aid of the pictures, to

evoke in my mind the exquisite story of the "Hunchback Horse," who could fly through the air, carrying his fortunate owner to the most delightful spots all over the world. Better still, the story I was absorbing was much finer than the one written in the book, because it finished just as I wished, and contained many adventures which were much more marvellous. I myself went on a visit to the princess who was sister to the moon, and daughter to the sun ; I talked with her for a long time, and advised her not to leave her palace, for fear that John-the-Simple might carry her off, and take her to see the terrible Tzar. She followed my advice, and we lived together for some time, eating sweets, drinking tea and coffee, and all the other forbidden things. Then we ordered round the "Hunchback Horse," and with John-the-Simple we all four set off on a visit to the palace of the moon, where once more we found plenty of sweets and nice things. We danced on the grass, which was of silver, and we strolled along by the side of the rivers, which were of milk. Then we turned our attention to poor John-the-Simple, of whom we made a beautiful prince, without plunging him first

into a cauldron of boiling water, as the wicked Tzar wished to do. The lovely princess turned into a fairy, and did all that was necessary for the transformation of John-the-Simple. Then, once all these marvels had been accomplished, the princess and I both married the handsome John. At this moment I recalled the fact that I was very ugly, but once more the beautiful princess-fairy interposed, and made me as handsome as she was herself, and we both rode off with our husband, flying through the air on the "Hunchback Horse," who still remained our attached friend.

I should have liked to have gone on with my reading, because life in the kingdom of Prince John must have been very delightful, but I was called away to tea, which, for us children, was the last meal of the day.

The music of the ball given in the palace of the moon was still sounding in my ears as I came slowly down the stairs; but as soon as I crossed the threshold of the dining-room, and saw the bored and vexed faces of the "grown-ups," the harmony died away, and the beautiful dream vanished.

When the drought was on, the "grown-ups"

did nothing but talk about it, and were always longing for rain ; now that the rain had come they were still alarmed and disturbed. Will nothing please them, I wondered, as I listened once more to their fears that if the rain continued too long there would be no corn, nor bread. And the monotonous buzz of their uninteresting conversation, which seemed to me as useless and as annoying as the buzz of a fly, dispersed all my exquisite recollections of the beautiful country which I had so lately left behind me.

I was almost glad when bedtime came, for I wanted to be alone, and live once more through the charming adventures of the afternoon. But when I put my head on the pillow the story would not return. The half light of the room seemed to oppress me ; the dark corners, always so disagreeable, were now particularly threatening, and suggested movements of unknown forces. I shut my eyes tight so as not to see those dark corners ; but even with my eyes shut I failed to call up the vision of the silver meadows of the palace of the moon. I could see nothing but the humble faces of the little girls, their eyes round and large with fear as

they tried to escape a blow. Why were the embroidery girls so unkind to them? Then there flashed through my brain the vision of all those bent figures, crossing the courtyard under the falling rain.

Once more I opened my eyes. The room seemed lighter, the corners not so black, nothing was moving.

Outside I could hear the rain pattering on the roof, and on the window-sill; still whispering the same mournful, plaintive rhythm, "Everything is 'poor,' and I shall always lie here in the grey half light, and the rain will drip, drip, drip on the trees, on every man, and on every child."

SAVA

X

SAVA

As soon as the apples were ripe enough to look tempting, without being ripe enough to be wholesome, we were forbidden to go into the orchard. I never understood why, except that I was told eating unripe fruit was likely to make me ill. Nevertheless, I observed that every one was eating apples, and I overheard at table that the peasants from a neighbouring village had come in the night with sacks and stolen a quantity. But when I went out into the hall and asked how the peasants of the neighbouring village had managed to get into the orchard, the menservants burst out laughing, and I felt extremely annoyed. All our servants nibbled apples at all hours of the day, and often gave some to us children. I even saw Dounia, the embroidery girl, gnawing a lovely apple from the specially sacred tree known to us

under the name of "Grandpapa's apple tree." She let me have a bite out of it, but hid the treasure carefully in her apron when Made-moiselle Renault came into the room. Finally, in order to protect the apple crop, which that year was specially good, grandmamma gave orders that the orchard should be guarded night and day by Sava.

Sava was the watchman. He was out and about every night, winter and summer, watching the house and grounds, and striking from time to time with a small iron bar on a sort of gong, which hung near the granary. I had scarcely ever seen him, but he was one of those beings whom one knows all the better because one so seldom sees them. Sava existed for me in the same category as John-the-Simple, as Baba-Yaga, as the Flame Bird, as all the other friendly personages in the only books that were really worth reading; personages who were, it is true, generally absent in bodily form, but whom one could summon at will, and send away again as soon as their presence was no longer required. When, for instance, I was sent away from table without dessert, how consoling it was to call up the picture of Baba-Yaga carrying off Made-

moiselle Renault, my special enemy, into the depths of the woods, and eating her in the hut which turns round on four chickens' feet ! Then again, when one of the boys would threaten me for having broken one of his toys : " Baba-Yaga will come and take you, you know ! " How simple it was to disarm the threat by replying : " There's no such person as Baba-Yaga ! "

It was just like this with Sava.

He wasn't a bit like the other servants. We never saw him sweeping or waiting at table at certain fixed hours ; and yet he seemed always present ; and though we did not see him, we knew that he was fulfilling some grand and mysterious duty. He was " The Watchman."

Sometimes, when I woke up in the night with a bad dream, I heard in the distance a sound that reminded me of a bell, and yet was quite different ! It was like a hoarse, angry, barking bell clanging through the silence of the night. I used to wake Pélagia Mikhailovna, and make her come to my bedside, in order to prolong the delicious feeling of having some one grown up near me, when still under the influence of an alarming dream ; I used to try and make her talk.

“Why does the bell sound in that way?”

Pélagia Mikhailovna would reply in sleepy tones that it was Sava, who was sounding the gong to frighten away wolves and robbers who roam about at night and do mischief.

This name of Sava, pronounced in the depths of the night, gave me a sensation of the wafting of wings, and called up before my eyes a tall, white, radiant figure with a spear, like the pictures I had seen of the archangel Michael, who slew the dragon that spits flames of fire. The dragon was the frightful dream that had woke me up; and the sound of the gong, which I could still hear in the distance, was the sound made by the archangel, as he drove away the dragon. But through it all I was conscious that it was Sava, who was striking the gong to drive away wolves and robbers. The harsh clang of the beaten gong inspired me with confidence, and I closed my eyes with the firm conviction that I should have no more terrifying dreams. At very rare intervals I saw in the courtyard a little bent old man, dressed in a long blue blouse, with a brown hat pulled down over his ears; and I knew that it was Sava; but I never dared go near him. It was indeed Sava,

but another Sava altogether. He looked like this, I thought, because he chose to change himself and take on various different aspects. He could, if he chose, appear as a tall, white figure, with a long lance in his hand; and it was even within the bounds of possibility that he could turn himself into a dragon, and spit fire! I should not have been afraid to witness these transformations; I should only have been afraid to think that they were not possible. Though naturally a chatterbox, and fond of asking questions, I never spoke to any one about Sava; but I always listened greedily to anything I heard being said about him. Whenever he formed the subject of conversation, I observed that he was always spoken of in a special way, as if an interesting story were being told; and these stories had the effect of making Sava an almost legendary personage.

He was not born in the village. He had neither home nor relations. No one knew who he really was, nor where he came from.

Many years ago, when grandpapa was still young, a pilgrim came to the house and asked to see grandpapa.

Grandpapa, who was good, and very pious,

loved pilgrims, allowed them always to feed in the kitchen, and sometimes talked for a long time with them. The story went that when grandpapa met the pilgrim in the hall, the pilgrim, who was Sava, said something to him in a foreign tongue, and that immediately grandpapa took him into his study. There they remained talking together for several hours. No one, not even grandmamma, ever knew what took place between them ; but Sava had been in the house ever since. At first he had a little room at the top of the house, but later on he was appointed watchman.

He had never put foot inside the house since my grandfather's death ; and if grandmamma wished to speak to him she went out on to the front steps, and talked to him there. It seems that there was a clause in my grandfather's will, stating that Sava was not a serf ; and grandpapa added a special request to his executors that Sava should be always well treated, and that he should be allowed to stay at N—— as long as he chose. Every one seemed to be convinced that Sava was of noble birth ; some said he was a brother of our grandfather's, who was disinherited and cursed by their father for

having done something wrong. Others, when they were vexed with grandmamma, whispered that he possessed papers which would give him the right to take possession of the whole estate that once belonged to my grandfather. Some looked upon him as a saint, others as a sorcerer. He could cure sick children by placing his hands on their head ; but he refused to heal grown-up people. By looking at a sick person he could tell whether they were likely to get better, or die. He had foretold my grandfather's death, before going into the sick-room. The second day of grandfather's last illness Sava asked to be allowed to go in and see the invalid. As he came into the room he said—" Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word."

And grandpapa replied: "Pray for me, Sava." At the same moment a cuckoo began to sing in the park, an event that only happened when there was to be a death in the family.

One day when I was in trouble with the authorities (an occurrence far from rare) I determined to run away. This I did so often that at last they left off looking for me. It was a day of magnificent wrath on my part against

injustice triumphing over everything—against vain and useless struggles. But though I felt powerless, that was no reason why I should submit. Injustice could only be met by flight, and by determined disobedience. Without wasting further words I must carry out my own plans, and do as I choose.

A new torture had been devised “in order to keep me quiet,” so my mother said ; and I was kept every day, for an hour after breakfast, in the drawing-room, with a task of embroidery, which I was told to finish. The first moment when I found myself alone, I quietly left the room by the window leading into the garden, with the firm resolve to lay in a good provision of apples, and then go and hide myself.

Humming a gay little tune, I went down the terrace steps. Above my head large, white, soft clouds floated in a delicious blue sky ; the flowers in the garden trembled under the breath of a light cool wind ; the fir trees on the terrace swept towards me their fragrant branches, as if saying : “Yes, yes ! Run, sing, and play !” An immense bed of roses, flushed with sunlight, and starred with bees, coloured flies, and shining beetles greeted my coming with

an intoxicating rush of sun-warmed perfume. Filled with the divine sensation of liberty, I strolled on, watching the sky, the trees, the flowers, as if I had never seen them before ; and finally, with the same leisurely gait, and with the same feeling of proud independence, I passed into the orchard by a hole through the hedge—our usual means of ingress and of egress.

On the right stood the almost bare cherry trees, with leaves already turning yellow ; on the left were the old apple trees, their branches bending under the load of green, yellow, and red apples.

I was an expert on the subject of apples, and knew that an apple gathered from the tree was no good, but that the best fruit lay always under the trees. I began to hunt in the grass for fallen apples ; to my astonishment I could find none. I strolled on to my "grandfather's apple tree," where I thought I was sure to find some. There, I only discovered two small half-rotten ones in the grass. With the view of helping nature, I pushed against the trunk with my shoulder. I failed to make any impression on the solidity of the veteran, and no fruit fell. Not in the least discouraged, I climbed on to

one of the nearest branches, and shook it as hard as I could. A score of apples fell to the ground. Down I came, leaving on the way a strip of petticoat, and with serenity in my soul, I gathered up my well-earned harvest.

Suddenly, as I raised my head, I saw close to me an old man wearing a blue shirt, and a hat pulled down over his ears; he was leaning on a stick, and watching me attentively. His face was small, white, and almost beardless; his lips thin and colourless, and nearly hidden between the aquiline nose and the prominent chin; his eyes were black, round, and lifeless, like bits of velvet, and they stared from beneath heavy eyebrows without seeming to see things. A kindly smile hovered round the colourless lips.

"What a good little girl! She has been collecting apples for me. Come, and put them with the others."

He turned away, and walked noiselessly on his bare feet through the dry grass, stooping as he went to avoid the branches. I felt no desire to run away, but followed him docilely, as if led by some irresistible force; though at the moment I neither recognized him nor questioned his authority.

After walking some distance under the trees we reached a small open space where stood a little thatched hut. Two enormous heaps of apples were piled at the entrance to this clearing ; a kettle was hanging over a fire of leaves and dried branches, which seemed to give out more smoke than heat. It was Sava's hut that stood before me. I had quite forgotten that he was the special watchman of the orchard.

"Put the apples down there," said Sava, "and go back to the house."

"But I picked them up for myself," I ventured to object.

"Are they yours?"

"No."

"Then you have stolen them."

My feelings were now indeed wounded. No one—not even Mademoiselle Renault—had ever dared to tell me I had stolen. A thief was a terrible being, who came in the night through the window, hid under the beds, and did something dreadful. I was not quite clear as to what he did, but it was something both bad and terrifying. I had not stolen ; I had taken what I wanted.

"I have not stolen ; I took what I wanted," I replied haughtily, "and I won't go back to the house. I am out for a walk."

"Whoever takes things without permission, does not only take—he steals. When I tell you to go back to the house you should obey ; for you must always obey your elders. He who obeys does right. A blind horse can be made to go right if the driver sees the way. The sheep in a flock would not know where to go if they had not a shepherd. Why did you come into the garden alone ? Because you were disobedient. Why did you steal the apples ? Because you were disobeying authority. Just as a stone cannot give fruit, so a thief cannot do right. Lying and disobedience lead to all the other sins—pride as well. You have disobeyed ; you have stolen ; and you intended to eat apples that had not yet been blessed ; that also was a sin ! Don't you know that God drove Eve out of Paradise because she ate an apple ?"

Again he looked at me with his black, lifeless eyes, and I felt extremely guilty, though scarcely knowing why.

Sava took up an apple, cut it across, and

showed me the core enclosing the pips, which looked like little green spots grouped in threes in the centre of the core ; then he explained to me that these little pips and the spaces between showed that the apple was a sacred fruit. The ten commandments, the number of the seraphim, and the four evangelists are symbolized in the interior of an apple, but in order to see them one must know how to cut it open in a particular way.

“ How could you think of eating such a fruit without God’s permission ? At the feast of the Saviour the apples are all blest ; after which all orthodox Christians can eat them, because the Saviour has then redeemed us from all sin. Before that feast it is a sin to eat them. Not a very great sin, it is true ; but God punishes all sin.”

I felt weighed down with guilt. Yes, it was true ; I had disobeyed. I had told stories, and I had wanted to eat apples before the feast of our Saviour ; and Eve had been driven out of Paradise for having eaten fruit without permission. But I had never been told the real true reason for not eating them. I had only been told that they were unwholesome ; and I

could see *that* was not true, for every one else was eating them. I wanted to tell Sava all this, but could not find the words in which to say it. But I answered quite simply and sincerely—

“ I won’t do it again.”

“ Good little girl ; good——” and his old eyes looked at me now almost tenderly.

This look in his eyes melted me. I can only imagine that wild beasts feel like that in the presence of their trainers. This old man, standing near his hut and his miserable little fire, the smoke of which rose straight towards heaven ; this old man who seemed to know so many great and good things, appeared to me almost supernatural. By the side of him I felt quite small and humble.

Sava had sat down ; he appeared to be either very sad or very tired. He breathed with difficulty, and his eyes seemed to look out far, far beyond the trees into space.

His face was strangely white, his eyes strangely fixed, but his lips moved silently, as if he were speaking to himself. Silently I watched him ; for something very serious seemed to be taking place around us. An inexpressible feeling of veneration, such as I

had never felt for any one else, sprang up in my heart for a bent, ragged, poor old man. And this feeling of pity and of veneration drew me very close to him, although he appeared to me all the time as something great and mysterious.

"You say, Sava, that one ought to obey grown-up people; but they are often unjust and cruel."

"We cannot hope for justice in this world. Don't reckon up other people's shortcomings; reckon up your own. Let wicked people do as they will, do yourself what is right, and God will reckon up the good and the evil. For all of us—good and bad, rich and poor, masters and servants—will one day stand before Him to be judged, and to be rewarded according to their deeds. We must not expect justice in this world."

I lay down in the grass near Sava, and watched attentively a blade of grass along which an ant ran, then stopped, and raised its tiny head and antennæ. Sava's words were unanswerable. Over and above all grown-up people, above the rich and the strong, there was God, who was stronger than them all. But

then came the thought, "Why does He allow wicked people to do as they like?"

"But how can God reckon up the wrong that other people do?"

"God knows all; He is everywhere, and sees everything."

I had been told this every day, but had never attached any exact meaning to the words. Now, however, the whole terror of this assertion entered into my soul. God was not up above there in the blue vault of heaven; He was everywhere, even among the trees that stood motionless around us; He was looking at me now, and was listening to what Sava was saying; it is because He sees and hears all, that He is able to reckon all, and to punish and reward; there is no escaping from this all-pervading power, which one cannot see, but which sees us. Then with a rush there came into my memory all grandmamma's injustices and unkindnesses towards the servants, of the peasants' brutality to the animals, and of Peter's cruelty to the children of the peasants, and I felt an immense pity for all those whom God was going to punish.

"When I am grown up, Sava, I won't do

any wrong to others ; and I won't allow any one else, not even grown-up people, to be wicked or unjust."

Sava did not reply. Was it that he would not answer, or was he too tired to speak? After a long silence he rose, threw some branches on the fire, and then came towards me and placed what seemed like an ice-cold hand on my head, repeating, as if to himself—

"We must not expect justice in this world. O, Lord God, do not abandon this child!"

The voice was so strong and so solemn that I wondered if it were Sava who was speaking, but I dared not raise my head, nor even move.

Then I felt the cold hand being removed from my head, and heard Sava's feeble voice saying—

"Now, little girl, run into the house, and be good!"

"Yes, Sava, I will go in now ; but I will come back and see you again."

"When you get leave to come ; but never come into the garden without leave."

"Then I shall never be able to come, because they never allow it."

This was the last time I met Sava, as I saw him that day in the orchard. A very few days after my visit to his hut, Sava died. I saw him once more in the church, when we all went to the funeral. He was in his coffin, which, surrounded with white tapers and incense, stood in the middle of the church. When, as was the custom, each member of the congregation approached the bier to give the dead man the last kiss, they wanted to lead me away, but I implored them to let me do as the others did. Pélagia Mikhailovna lifted me up, and I kissed one of the cold hands that were crossed on his breast. Then Sava, white as his white shirt and winding sheet; appeared to me in reality, as I had always pictured him in imagination, when I woke up in the night troubled with bad dreams.

Sava was buried on the day of the feast of the Saviour. All the peasants, as they left the church, were eating apples.

We had apples for breakfast, but I could not eat any.

‘THE REINDEER PASSES’

XI

'THE REINDEER PASSES'

THE pond was a delightful place—large, deep and full of all sorts of constantly renewed interests. Swarms of tadpoles and black water beetles made it their home, while enormous gnats, with monstrously long legs, skimmed over its surface. In one corner grew tall plants with pretty mauve flowers. Emerald green dragonflies flew over it; and gigantic carp, only visible on days when there was fishing to be watched, made it their habitation. We were told that the bottom was muddy, but in some parts near the edges this was covered with fine sand, and it was there that we were allowed every day to bathe, under the watchful eye of Pélagia Mikhailovna, and in the company of the little under-nurse Arishka, whom my mother had nicknamed "Lilliput."

Poor Lilliput! One day mamma wrote to

the country, and said she wanted a young girl to help the nurse, and Arishka was sent. She was small, fat, with a round head and podgy cheeks, with coarse, black, shiny hair, smelling of rancid butter, plastered down on either side of her head, as if it had been stuck there. She reminded us exactly of one of those dummies one used to see formerly in milliners' shops, dummies with red cheeks and painted black hair coming down well on either side of the face. Her black, shining and stupid eyes, set wide apart, wore an expression of constant astonishment. Poor Lilliput! How angry mamma was when she saw her. "What! this hideous little object, this fat lump, this lilliput—was this the sort of person to be sent to wait on *her* children?" There was even an idea of sending the girl back at once to the country, but the peasants who had brought her were not returning for a week; and before that time came Arishka had found a champion in Pélagia Mikhailovna, and she remained in town.

It was true she only remained on sufferance; mamma could not bear the sight of her, and never called her anything but Lilliput, always pretending she forgot the girl's real name.

This nickname (which the other servants thought was much the same sort of name as one would give to a dog), her exceptional smallness, and her stupid good-nature, were the cause of much suffering to poor Arishka.

Was she as stupid as every one thought her?

She had brought with her from her village a store of religious beliefs, a candid naïveté, and a picturesque but often coarse language, which she could never break herself of using. All these peculiarities made her appear, of course, ridiculous in the refined society of a Moscow servants’ hall. As long as she lived in the country her diminutive size, which made it difficult for her to do field work, caused her to be more or less a useless mouth which had to be fed, and, consequently, a burden on her family; among the town servants she remained an inferior and ridiculous being. Transplanted from the sordid cottage, which in winter she never left, for the very good reason that she had no clothes in which to go out, she was at first quite lost when she arrived at our house. It was both too large and too small; for on the one hand she missed the vast expanse of fields, and on the other hand it was filled with unknown

objects, whilst the things with which she was familiar were not to be found. She had, too, many clothes, and yet at the same time she was cold, because she could not sleep at night on the top of the great stove, as she was in the habit of doing at home. She could often be seen running about with her shoes off in one of the rooms, so as to get some circulation into her feet, which were numbed with having to wear shoes.

Accustomed to passive obedience, and at the same time possessing a certain amount of dexterity, she soon grew accustomed to her new style of work, but no new conception, no new idea, ever penetrated her brain, which was already so well furnished with beliefs, with prejudices, and with narrow formulas, that had no connection at all with her new style of existence.

She was very pious, but believed in too many things at once ; and I cannot help thinking that the devil, with his attendant evil spirits, inhabiting ponds, forests, and stables ; with his sorcerers and his chosen animals, who could see and predict coming events, did not, in her faith, play a more important part than did

the Holy Trinity, which consisted for her in God the Father, God the Son, and the Mother of God.

Lilliput repeated her prayers night and morning ; in town these prayers were said in our nursery ; for from the first moment of her arrival she had been entranced by the sight of the large picture of the Virgin, with the golden halo, and the long silver mantle, the Virgin whose eyes followed one as one moved about the room. She would pray in a low voice in front of this picture, making constantly long and unctuous signs of the cross. I often watched these most interesting rites as I lay in bed, and listened with curiosity to the murmured prayers, which seemed to me peculiarly beautiful, and quite different from ordinary prayers. It is true I did not understand a word of what she said, but neither did I understand the prayers I was taught to say. This fact did not astonish me at all. “ Lord God ! Lord God ! ” she would murmur. “ Saint Nicholas, The Assumption, Christmas, Jesus Christ, Intercession, Intercession ! ” she would repeat over and over again with rising emotion. “ Holy, gracious Virgin ! ” Then she would prostrate herself to the ground and

once more repeat the names of the most well-known saints, and of the festivals held in greatest honour. The whole appeal consisted principally of a category of substantives, but the inflections of the voice were so harmonious, and the tone of entreaty that inspired every word was so touching, that this strange, meaningless gabble went straight to my heart, and I often asked myself: "What is it that Lilliput is praying for?" And then I added: "O, Lord God, answer Lilliput's prayer, and do what she asks!"

But this was the only point of contact that I had with Lilliput. Although we lived side by side, no suspicion of intimacy existed between us. Lilliput was for me a necessary piece of furniture, which one only took into consideration when one had to make use of it. Lilliput was not expansive; she scarcely ever spoke except when questioned, and then she would reply only in monosyllables. It is true that on her arrival from the country she was more talkative; but as she brought with her from the village the habit of calling everything by its simple, not to say broad-peasant name, she was constantly getting reprimanded for indecent

language. At last, it would seem she made up her mind not to take part in conversations, as she found it impossible to understand what should or should not be said. This picturesque language was, however, a constant source of delight to the Moscow servants, and without any desire on her part she had become the acknowledged jester of the kitchen. How often do I remember having seen Lilliput crimson with emotion, her eyes more astonished and more prominent than ever, talking and gesticulating at the kitchen table, in the midst of homeric shouts of laughter.

Poor Lilliput!

In the country, I only saw her at bathing time, when we all met at the pond. She was chosen to take part in this daily ceremony because, according to our old nurse, “she swam like a duck.” It was a daily joy for me to watch Arishka floating, diving, swimming with one arm in the air, or, after swimming all round the pond, turn a somersault in the water in front of us, waving her legs in the air, and then throwing herself backwards, floating on the surface of the water. It is rather a remarkable fact that, though this extra-

ordinary art filled me with admiration, yet it in no wise astonished me, and I experienced no desire to imitate it; I watched Arishka go through her performance with the vague feeling that I was watching a being who had no more points of resemblance with myself than had an animal. The horse dragged huge carts, piled up with corn, the birds flew in the air, Lilliput turned somersaults in the water; it was out of my power to accomplish similar exploits, because I was neither a horse, a bird, nor Arishka.

One day, when we were returning from bathing, Arishka announced that it was the last time we should go down to have a swim, because the reindeer would pass the next day, and would dip its hoof in the water, which would then become quite cold. I glanced at Pélagia Mikhailovna, and observed that she nodded approbation of this statement.

“When will the reindeer pass?” I asked.

“To-morrow. On the first feast of the Saviour, the reindeer dips its hoof in the water,” replied my old nurse.

“Can we go and see?”

“No one can see it.”

“Why?”

“Because no one can see it.”

We were walking rapidly towards home, but I made up my mind that I would penetrate further into this extraordinary business of the reindeer. It was of all the greater importance to me, because I had never seen a living reindeer; there were none on the estate, and I had never heard of there being any in the neighbourhood. So on the first opportunity I questioned my old nurse, and discovered that there was evidently some mystery attached to this story of the reindeer, something which my old friend wished to hide from me; for, contrary to her usual habit, she replied just as the “grown-ups” usually do—

“Don’t bother me! I don’t know what it means. They say, ‘The reindeer has dipped its hoof into the water,’ because after August 1st the water is too cold for bathing.” And she went on knitting her stocking with a determined manner, which forbade further questioning.

No! Answers of that sort were not what was required, when one evinced a serious and legitimate desire to learn; so I went off and hunted for Lilliput. It was not so easy to find

her. She was busy ironing in the outer kitchen, a spot where we were forbidden to go. In spite of my inveterate habits of disobedience, I, on this occasion, remembered the order ; for I did not wish to risk punishment on the very eve of such an important event as that of the arrival of the reindeer. So I did not venture into the kitchen myself, but sent a page boy to tell Lilliput that mamma was asking for her ; and then I watched anxiously for her appearance in the courtyard.

“ Lilliput,” I said to her at once, in a very serious tone of voice, “ it is not mamma who wants you, it is I. I want to know when the reindeer is coming, because I mean to go and see it, and you are to come with me.”

Lilliput shook her round wooden head, and told me that what I wanted was impossible, because no one knew when the reindeer was to come, and no one had ever seen it.

“ Then how do they know that it comes ? ”

“ Some old people—very old people—had once seen it, or it might even have been some of the saints who saw it,” Arishka replied in a mysterious whisper. “ There are many things that can’t be seen by everybody. For instance,

mademoiselle, have you ever seen the ‘domovoi’? but they exist all the same. And the ‘léchi’ too? Out of a hundred peasants who go into the woods, only one, perhaps, will see them. Have you ever found a single peasant who has been into the woods on the feast of St. Erofé? No. No one has ever been there on that day, and yet, every one knows the ‘léchis’ all go mad on that day; they break the trees, hunt the animals, and do a lot of damage, before they disappear once more under ground. The reindeer comes on the first feast of the Saviour to dip its hoof in the water. Of this there can be no doubt, but no one has ever seen it happen—no one can see it. I myself, I could not see it, and I would not wish to do so.”

The conversation had taken such an unexpected and thrilling turn, that I hastily dragged Arishka into the barn, and there, stretched side by side on the soft and perfumed couch of dry hay, in a mysterious and suggestive twilight, surrounded by the caressing warmth which the hay brings into its dark prison from the warm rays of the summer sun, we two, for the first time in our long life together, exchanged confidences, and spoke to each other

with open heart. What wonderful things I learnt in that too short hour!

It was an hour consecrated principally to the discussion of the important problems of the invisible world. I learnt that the world of familiar demons, which are at times good and helpful, and at other times bad and harmful, according to their humour, or to that of the person with whom they are in communication, possesses no definite and fixed form. These spirits may either assume the most commonplace or the most extraordinary shapes. This is why one can never be sure whether one sees them or does not see them. One of Lilliput's uncles saw the devil himself in person, under the form of a cock; and he only discovered that it was the devil when the cock—which was in the *isba* in winter time—flew up to the ceiling, and after having dropped filth on the peasant's head, disappeared. But there are people who are able to recognise "the impure thing" immediately; these people are generally either very old, or are sorcerers, or saints. Oh, how clear it all appeared to me now! How well this all fitted in with my own ideas on the subject of the world in general. Was

it not a fact that the things and the beings surrounding me possessed the faculty of changing continually, and for an indefinite number of times? Did not a chair often take the form of a carriage, and then change into a horse, every time that we played at “travelling”? Why was it so difficult to believe that a spirit—this something, which lives and yet does not live, which exists and yet does not exist, can take on itself an infinite number of shapes? Those words with which I had been long familiar, of “domovoi” (spirits of the house), of “vadianoi” (spirits of the water), “léchi” (spirits of the wood), “palevoi” (spirits of the fields), became, after a few minutes’ conversation with Lilliput, tangible and real beings.

The next day, on the first feast of the Saviour, an imposing ceremony took place. All the horses were washed in our pond, and all the cows in the village pond. It appears that this was not quite the right thing to do, but that the cows ought to have been washed in the same water as the horses; in fact, this was the custom in the village. But my grand-mamma looked upon cows as very dirty animals, and would not have the water of her own pond

"spoilt." This was why she gave the order that all our cows were to be washed in the village. On the other hand, she considered that the water in the village pond was not clean enough for our horses, so they were washed in our own pond. Unfortunately we were not allowed to go and see the great washing ceremony in the village, but what we saw at home was really a splendid sight. Tarass, his two stable helps, and Little Elisar, the under-shepherd, came out of the stables, leading the horses by their halters. We, with all the children from the courtyard, followed in a merry swarm. When we reached the pond the men took off their shirts, each jumped on to the back of a horse, and led two other horses by their halters. Then the whole cavalcade splashed into the pond. Some of the horses did not care to go in, and they had to be dragged by main force. The men shouted, the horses plunged and neighed, the water, generally so quiet, grew rough and broken, whilst waves, that seemed to me enormous, splashed against the edges of the pond. The willows, which usually dipped their trailing, motionless branches in the quiet water,

now, caught by a cool breath of wind, tossed and waved them in the air, as if scared by the unaccustomed disturbance. We also, all of us, were as disturbed as were the willows ; the boys tried to rival the men in shouting ; the girls were jumping with joy. A happy feeling of intoxication invaded my whole being, and in order to express supreme ecstasy I rolled on the ground, neighing and snorting like the horses. How exquisite it all was !

From that day forth my friendship with Lilliput increased and grew ; we passed all our leisure moments together.

The autumn was coming on. A feverish activity reigned throughout the fields, in the garden, and in the courtyard. A perceptible change took place in all around. The trees turned yellow, the swallows disappeared, the mornings grew fresh ; long white trails of cobweb, “ the cobwebs of the Blessed Virgin,” hovered in the mornings above the fields and the close-cropped meadows, where a soft golden light pervaded the transparent air. The corn was being cut everywhere ; cucumbers were being salted near the cellar ; large blocks of honey were served every day at table.

Every one looked busy, preoccupied and tired. They feared the harvest would not be all gathered in before the feast of the Assumption, which was the latest date for harvesting and for the sowing of winter crops.

The nearer we came to this feast of the Assumption, the sadder and more pensive grew Lilliput. She often stared at me without answering my urgent questions on some difficult point of occult science. Sometimes I caught her with tears in her eyes. One day I was so struck with the suffering expression on the face of my new friend, that I threw myself in tears on her neck, and begged her to confide her sorrow to me.

"Don't cry, mademoiselle," sobbed out, at last, Lilliput; "it is my fate. The feast of the Assumption will come, the sun will dwindle, and I shall dwindle."

I had not the key to this dark saying. I showered fresh questions on Arishka, I kissed her, I conjured her to confide her trouble to me, and I swore by all the saints that I would tell no one else, if it was indeed a secret. Then Lilliput confided to me that she was to die at the feast of the Assumption. I gathered from

her long rigmarole that she wanted to marry Alexander, and in order to find out if her wish was to be granted, she went one night to the four cross-roads. There she remained a long time listening. Now, when a young girl remains all night at the four cross-roads listening, she is able to find out what will be her fortune during the coming year. If she hears a little bell tinkling, she is going to be married; but if she hears in the distance a church bell—instead of a sweetheart, death will come to claim her.

Well, Lilliput had heard quite distinctly at the four cross-roads the sound of a church bell. She was terrified; she wanted to run away, but her legs felt like lead, and she could not move. Then she prayed to God to break the charm, but the only word she could pronounce was “Assumption.” It was therefore God himself who had shown her the date when her life was to end. “At the feast of the Assumption I shall fall ill,” she added, when she had finished her story. “You will see—and I shall never rise again.”

To say that I was terrified would not be true; I was petrified! It was not the idea of Arishka’s death which struck me so painfully, for I had no exact notion of that irreparable and

eternal state; I was terrified as if by the too close contact of something invisible, indefinable, intangible, and nevertheless hostile and powerful. As long as it was only a question of invisible and extraordinary beings, who might even at times be wicked, I was not exactly frightened, for, after all, they entered more or less into the familiar domain of the fabulous; but this story of the night, of the four cross-roads in all their solitary length, this black nothingness, and this frightful message, which God himself had heard and confirmed; all this struck real terror into my heart!

"What's to be done, Lilliput?" I stammered out at last.

"There is nothing to do now but pray to God."

And from that moment I awaited anxiously and expectantly—what? I did not myself know. Every night before going to sleep I said to God: "O, Lord God, don't let it happen!"

On the feast of the Assumption I fell ill. Pélagia Mikhailovna, when she was undressing me the night before said: "Go to sleep quickly! To-morrow is the feast of the Assumption, and

you must get up early to go to church.” As soon as she had left the room, the story Lilliput had told me became an obsession, and I prayed with fervour : “ Lord God, don’t let it happen ! ”

At last I fell asleep, but in the night woke up with a start, and uttering a cry of terror, which I myself heard, just as I was on the point of waking. The severe and anxious face of my old nurse was bending over me, and with her dry hand she made the sign of the cross above my head. It seemed to me that I was returning from a far country ; I did not know from whence. I was glad and reassured when I found I was in my bed, and in the well-known room ; and I once more closed my eyes with a feeling of returned confidence. But again a cry of horror, a cry uttered by myself, awoke me. It was only towards morning, when I saw the flush of day outside the window, that I fell into a quiet sleep.

I awoke late, with a headache, and with such a feeling of lassitude that I had no wish to get up. I closed my eyes at once, so that I might be left quietly in bed. The precaution was useless ; my mother was in the room, inquiring if I was better, and giving orders that I

was to be left in bed. She was discussing with Pélagia Mikhailovna what was best to be done till the arrival of the doctor, who had been sent for from the town.

What a piece of luck! If the doctor comes to see me who am not dying, he will be able to cure Lilliput, who certainly at this hour must be in a dying state. I gathered that it must be late, and that every one else must be at table, as mamma was speaking of sending me up a little broth. I avoided asking for news of Arishka, for I had an instinctive fear of some misfortune; without knowing why, I understood intuitively that, if I knew for certain Lilliput was ill, it might add to my danger.

What a miracle! Lilliput herself came into my room, with some broth on a tray. Her round, red face was smiling; her eyes looked as surprised as usual; her hair more shiny than ever. She looked quaint, full of life, and happy, with her yellow shawl, only worn on great feast days, folded triumphantly across her full bosom. Just as darkness vanishes when a lighted lamp is brought in, so, at the sight of this apparition, my agony suddenly vanished. "It had not happened after all!"

My old nurse went off to her dinner, leaving me under the care of Lilliput, after admonishing her not to talk to me. It was quite an easy matter for Lilliput to keep silence, for she never started a conversation. As for myself, I had no inclination, either, to talk. There was on the face that beamed opposite to me an expression of beatitude which contrasted too much with my own anxiety of a few minutes ago ; there was, besides, something too persistent in these fixed prominent eyes, which stared straight at me. No, I had no wish to speak to her—I did not want to look at her. I was tired, I felt within me a feeling of emptiness, and I closed my eyes.

After sleeping well that night, I got up the next morning feeling refreshed, and glad to be able to eat, to run, to play, to live ; and I soon forgot that dark night will sometimes send evil messages to young girls at the four cross-roads.

The days followed one another and grew shorter and shorter, for the sun was losing its power, and the nights were growing longer. Since the “reindeer had dipped its hoof in the water of the pond,” the linen was rinsed there

every week, and I often saw Arishka coming back from the pond with a yoke over her shoulders, and two large bundles of linen, from which the water trickled in streams, hanging at either end.

One morning, when we were all at early breakfast in the dining-room, we heard at a great distance, a shrill, piercing cry, sounding hardly like that of the human voice. The cry gave me a shock, and I saw before my eyes the four cross-roads, and Lilliput, pale and fainting, appearing through a dark cloud—whilst almost at the same moment a woman's voice cried, just outside the house: "Help! help! Arishka has drowned herself!" Then the black cloud swept over me as well, and for a few seconds—perhaps longer—I saw nothing.

Then the whole household poured forth like a hive of bees. Some ran, some shouted, some asked questions. Hasty footsteps were heard above, on all sides, and out of doors. My brother was crying, Peter was yelling with fright; I put my head down on the table and sobbed. We were taken up-stairs into the nursery. Nurse gave us some ginger-bread and some apples, and kept on repeating: "It is

nothing ; it is nothing !” But her voice trembled, and she crossed herself continually. When she locked our door, and shut us in, I had a sort of feeling that we had been transported somewhere far away from all other human beings, for the house had become suddenly quite silent.

Some one knocked at the door. The old nurse opened it a little way and a hurried conversation took place between her and “the viper.” Although they talked in whispers, with their two heads close together, I could hear every word.

“No, they have not yet succeeded in restoring Arishka to life.”

“She fell into the water as she was rinsing the linen—Tarass rescued her. She was lying at the bottom, quite at the bottom, and looked as if she were dead.”

“How could such a thing have happened to her, when she ‘could swim like a duck’?”

“No one knows ; the laundry woman who was with her says she was trying to catch hold of a piece of linen which was floating away, and that as she fell, she went straight to the bottom like a lump of lead.”

Silence and mystery reigned throughout the house—time went on—what could we do? There was nothing to do but pray to God; so I repeated aloud, as I made the sign of the cross: “O, Lord God, don’t let it happen!” The two boys also crossed themselves.

And once more the time passed in absolute silence in the still lifeless house. Suddenly we heard a vague murmur of voices drawing nearer; then other sounds followed; some one was running quickly through the next room. Dounia, the embroidery girl, shouted as loud as she could, as she attempted to open our door: “She is saved!”

So poor Lilliput was saved! She was ill for a long time, and then one morning she returned and began to clean out our room; she was less red-cheeked than usual, but still fat in the face, and just like a milliner’s dummy. She had grown more taciturn than ever, and scarcely replied when she was spoken to. I observed her more with curiosity than with joy, for my attachment to her had worn itself out, through the various emotions which she had inspired, and which I had received. In this last scene in the Lilliput

drama, the expression which captivated my imagination more than anything else was : “ She fell into the water like a lump of lead.” What I wanted to have cleared up was—how could she have turned into a lump of lead? On this subject I questioned Lilliput in vain ; she either refused to reply at all, or else said very little. At last one day she exclaimed—

“ I won’t tell you anything. Whoever comes back from the other world knows three words, which must never be told to any one ! ”

TO D. B. M.

‘FEBRUARY 19, 1861’

XII

‘ FEBRUARY 19, 1861 ’

I WAS now eleven years old. Thanks to rather exceptional circumstances, I knew, and I understood, what serfdom really was, and I awaited the day for the liberation of the serfs with the mixture of mystic devotion and of tragic terror which a sacrifice ever inspires.

I had not lived, as was the case with most of my contemporaries amongst children, in the corrupting atmosphere of slave ownership. I was able to observe and to compare. My father was born of foreign parents, and possessed very advanced ideas ; he never allowed in our own house the ordinary cruel treatment of servants. On my mother's side, however, every one was a landed proprietor, and as “ Krépostniki ”¹ as it was possible to be.

¹ One of the families of the nobility who opposed the emancipation of the serfs under Alexander II

During the winter we lived in Moscow, but we passed regularly some of the summer months at my grandmother's country seat, where there were at least thirty serf women servants, without counting the other servants about the house, and the peasants in the village.

According to the customs of that time, we children were the special charge, from quite infant days of an old nurse, "Niania," of the type so peculiar to Russia in days before the emancipation of the serfs, and which has been so often described by Russian writers. This type of nurse played a very special part in the Russian family of the old *régime*, and held a position somewhere between the mother and the grandmother; it was she to whom Pouchkin read his poems, and to whom Tolstoi consecrated his most ardent pages. I was so fortunate as to have for Niania a most exceptional woman, who possessed not only character, but intelligence. She was, I think, the daughter of a liberated peasant belonging to Prince Chérémétieff, and when young had served in the prince's house. When the prince's footman desired to marry her, she would not consent, because, as he was a serf,

such a marriage would have re-plunged her into serfdom. In the end the prince liberated the handsome Sergius, and our Niania was thus able to marry him. She entered my mother's service when her husband, completely crippled by rheumatism, was already a pensioner in an almshouse belonging to Prince Chérémétieff.

I can only remember Pélagia Mikhailovna when she appeared old, tall and withered, with a profile that looked as if it had been carved with a hatchet out of a piece of rock. She was born to bring up free men. She inspired absolute respect, and displayed on all occasions a dignity which kept at arms' length any possible humiliation. Neither my mother nor her many hardened "Krépostniki" relations ever dared to strike her, as they were in the habit of doing when correcting other domestic servants. It was Pélagia Mikhailovna who taught us our prayers night and morning. There is one prayer to the Virgin, which all Russian children learn before any other ; it finishes by an appeal for the salvation of all people, and of all orthodox Christians. At the end of the ordinary formula she used to say : " Prostrate yourself now three times." This I did. " Now repeat :

‘Deliver, O Lord, the peasants!’ and then prostrate yourself again three times.” I used to obey her minutely, and then, although she had not, during the first part, joined in our prayers, she used to prostrate herself three times by my side.

It was only later that I began to understand, even vaguely, the meaning of this prayer, which I repeated every day mechanically.

At five years of age I began to have governesses, sometimes German, and sometimes French ones. They all passed through my life, leaving no traces, and very few recollections. They appear to me now to have been all of the same character—tyrants placed over us, whom we were forced to obey, or escape from by any possible means that came to hand,—obstinacy, impertinence or mischievous tricks. The influence of the old uneducated nurse was increased by the appearance of this new element in life. The “tyrant” made us suffer, and Pélagia Mikhailovna was the comforter and the adviser. In the constant struggle with governesses I had, like all revolted beings, to seek shelter. It was naturally the servants who could save or betray me; and in the country

specially, I sought, ever more and more, the society of the servants. An instinctive sympathy grew up between us. The servants talked of their affairs before me without embarrassment and without distrust. Thus I learnt many things, and heard many unhappy stories. I compared the position of my Pélagia Mikhailovna, respected as she was, with that of the other women of her own age, who had often had their ears boxed in my presence. And I never ceased to demand: “Why this difference?” and received ever from my old nurse the same reply: “It is because they are serfs.”

During the long winter evenings in Moscow, when the attractions of outdoor life were no longer tempting my restless growing days, these impressions deepened and germinated in my mind, and my nurse and I would talk about them together. I would ply her with questions, and she would explain to me facts that I had witnessed, and tell me of other unknown and terrible facts, which appeared to my imagination inconceivable. I learnt how mothers were sold in distant villages, separated for ever from their children; how young girls were whipped in the

stables ; I was told how one of my uncles—a man who brought me, every time he came to Moscow, the most ideal dolls—gave orders that a young girl, who was suspected only of having stolen a ring of his wife's, should be stripped naked on a winter's day, and have cold water thrown over her.

Little by little the odious spectre of serfdom rose in all its horrors before me, and I eagerly embraced, not only the hatreds of my old nurse, which scarcely existed, but the slumbering hatreds of the dozens of young girls who, in the great country house, bent day after day over their embroidery frames, working marvellous designs on linen, on batiste, or on tulle ; the jeering hatreds of the menservants drawn up in a line in the halls and passages ; and of the little pages, whose only duties were to fill the pipe of their master, or to wave, during meal time, branches of birch, to keep the flies away from the guests.

Then, suddenly, things no less terrible began to be whispered in the drawing-room. "Times are becoming difficult. The peasants disobey. There are alarming signs. What can be going on? Before long the peasants will assassinate

everybody, and will burn down all the country houses."

The tone of sincere fear in which these whispered remarks were made suggested many more vivid terrors to me than did the actual words. What remained in my mind was the notion that my mother, my father, my aunt were to be assassinated, and our house at N——, which for me was the most beautiful place on the face of the earth—was to be burnt down. There were moments when I felt giddy with horror, and my dreams were filled with alarms of fire and of murder. I ventured to question neither the inhabitants of the drawing-rooms, with their strained and grave faces, nor the servants, who whispered strange things to each other. A mystery which I could not fathom was developing itself.

After a time the new impending reform was discussed in less subdued tones; even when visitors came the question of the emancipation of the serfs was permitted as a subject of conversation. The most convinced defenders of the proposed new state of things admitted the possibility of a peasant revolt; but they added daringly: "It can't be helped; the change has

to come!" I don't know how the idea came to me, but I succeeded in understanding that the serfs would soon be as free as my old nurse; that the change would be a right one, but none the less alarming.

I naturally went with my good news to Pélagia Mikhailovna, who told me that it was true, but that I must not talk about it. Why?

It seems it was never to be spoken about "before the servants." It was in vain that the masters talked in their drawing-rooms and dining-rooms behind closed doors; the servants and the children had their own means of knowing all that went on. In the kitchens and the passages the words and conversations of the "masters" were freely discussed. Examples were cited: "The masters no longer dare to punish us; they are becoming quite gentle, and are *afraid* to behave as they used formerly."

At last I understood, and understood fully, the meaning of my daily prayer; and I observed that my nurse as she prayed had tears in her eyes, and remained for a long time after me, prostrated before the sacred images.

Days and months went by. The discussions of the grown-up people became of a more and more definite character, and the problem for them was evidently growing clearer. They, however, were constantly using incomprehensible words, such as "Commission," "Drawing up of manifestoes," etc. These words had no meaning at all for me, but their sound was imposing and mysterious. The men became excited over their conversations; the ladies sighed, and were more than ever careful to see that the doors were closed.

On the kitchen side things were clearer to understand: "They have had enough of our blood. They have reigned long enough." These were some of the remarks I used to hear. Very often, whilst I was being put to bed, I asked my nurse if they were going to kill my mother, my aunt, or myself. The reply was always in the negative, but the old woman would become thoughtful when I questioned her; and would add, in order to re-assure me: "Everything will happen according to God's will. Don't listen to the grown-up people."

Among all the sonorous, but unintelligible words that I heard repeated every day, the word "manifesto" became gradually more and more a reality that I was capable of grasping. In my imagination it was something similar to the trumpet of the archangel on the day of judgment. Then I seemed to interpret it as thunder, flame, and whirlwind; but it always remained something enormous, and indefinitely definite. It was bound to come, this vague something, this manifesto; and God's will would be accomplished—the serfs would be freed, and possibly everything would be burnt to the ground. I awaited the event in dull, tense agony. I believe that a similar feeling reigned both in the kitchen and the pantry. Was it a fact that they no longer whispered together of the future; or, haunted as I was by phantoms of my imagination, did I no longer listen, and try to pick up what was being said? But the impression that remains on my mind is that of the solemn and painful silence reigning in a death chamber. How long this lasted I cannot say.

One morning Pélagia Mikhailovna woke me

up as usual. Her expression was more than ordinarily solemn and severe. I understood at once by the way she said, "Dress yourself quickly, and don't let's have any nonsense!" that something special was going to happen. My brother and my cousin dressed themselves also quite quickly, and without making any noise. Suddenly I noticed that we had not said our prayers. Scarcely were we dressed than our nurse said to us: "God has freed the peasants; come and see the manifesto!" We rushed after her; I can see, even now, the passage we had to cross, and the large room, one window of which looked out on the Znamenka Street, and the Place Arbat. It was to this window that our nurse led us. The road which we looked on was almost deserted. A street lamp stood out in black outline against the grey, sodden snow. On the column of the lamp-post, and appearing quite small and insignificant, as we looked down on it, there fluttered a piece of white paper. Around the lamp-post there stood a group of men and women, making the sign of the cross. Others, as they came along, took off their hats and crossed them-

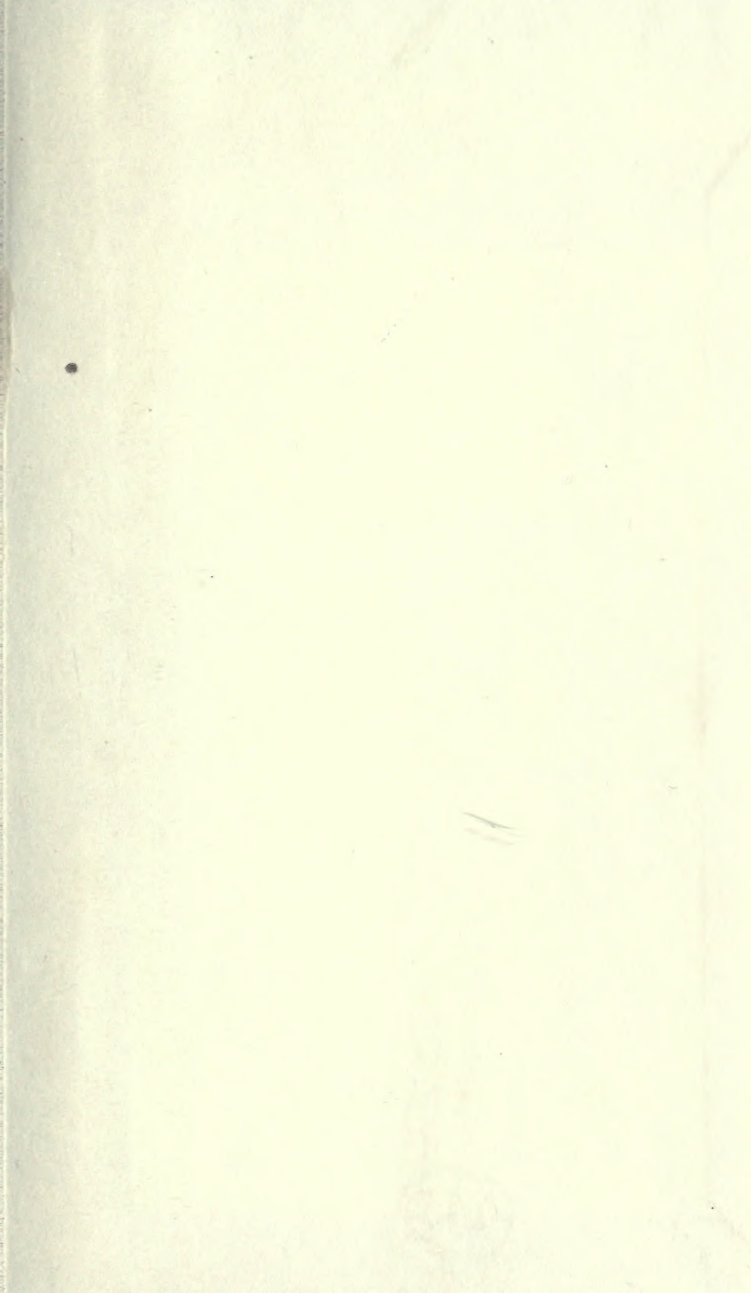
selves. I longed to ask if that was all, *if the manifesto had not already gone by*. But Pélagia Mikhailovna's face wore a more severe expression than usual; she crossed herself fervently every time that she observed a fresh group approaching the lamp-post.

She was praying silently with her people.

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THE END

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